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SYMPHONY OF TERROR



A race of death
against the
invading aliens.

FIRST PUBLICATION IN ANY FORM

Osaka, Japan: some months before the Visitors' recapture of some regions of the Earth

The sky burned in the distance. Jagged lightning sparks lanced the dark night. Professor Karl Schwabauer, blinded by the brilliance, almost crashed the Toyota into a wall. Setsuko, his companion, screamed.

"But we must save them!" Schwabauer rasped as the car, painted orange and blazoned with the Visitor insignia in order to camouflage its true purpose, hurtled through the narrow streets of a rural Japanese village about ten kilometers from Osaka Castle, known to be the control center of Lady Murasaki, the Visitor who had usurped the command of the Far Eastern Sector of the reptiles' terrestrial empire. Only twenty-four hours earlier, Schwabauer and Setsuko, biochemist turned geisha girl, had watched their companions from America, Matt and Tomoko Jones, their adopted boy CB, and the mysterious swordmaster Kenzo Sugihara, as they had set out on their almost insurmountable mission ... to stop those hideous, man-eating lizards from reestablishing their dominion over the Earth. From the minute he'd seen them leave, wearing the dermoplast lizard masks that Setsuko had designed in her laboratory so that they could pass unnoticed among the aliens, the professor had been in a state of continual mental turmoil. For Setsuko, experimenting with a red dust sample in her laboratory, had unearthed a secret that might mean the return of *all* the saurian conquerors from the dark side of the moon . . . indeed, might mean an immediate end to humanity's newfound freedom! It was a terrifying discovery. How hopeless the situation of the human race seemed now! But he still had to go on. They were his friends. He owed them much.

"It's probably too late already, *ja*? And I'm not the heroic type. But I have to try, I have to!"

"Yes, yes . . . watch out for those peasants!"

The car careened around an embankment. A hot wind roared through the open windows, searing, choking. Outside, a child yelped as she skipped out of the car's way. "There is the castle," said Schwabauer, slowing down.

They stopped and got out of the car. "There, up ahead!" Setsuko was running, her hastily donned kimono fluttering, her wooden shoes clattering on the gravel of the ill-kept road.

He looked. Tears filled his eyes. “It is a success . . . Osaka Castle is burning.” A success! He thought. Dr. Schwabauer was old enough to remember the Second World War; he remembered how they had bombed Dresden, how the priceless monuments of a great culture had been made victims to the cruel dictates of war. Why do men create such beautiful things? he thought. We only destroy them. “They’re dead,” he whispered. “All our friends. They have to be!”

Against the far mountain, a pagoda of fire; against the backdrop of the star-strewn night, the mushroom cloud of death. “Their reactor must have been set off,” said Setsuko as he caught up with her. They stood there together, the aged anthropology professor who had left his home to study the way of life of an alien civilization and the beautiful, inscrutable woman who had given up a brilliant career as a scientist in America in order to live as mistress to a swordmaster. “I can’t believe they’re dead.”

“A bitter victory,” said Schwabauer softly, burying his head in his hands. “Will they never learn? They are eight hundred years beyond us, those aliens, in technology and science . . . but as far as compassion is concerned, they might as well be in the Stone Age. Oh, Setsuko, I’m so angry I could kill myself.”

“No, Professor Schwabauer.” Setsuko touched his hand. He was grateful for that bit of human warmth. But suddenly she snatched her hand away and began to point excitedly.

“What’s the matter?” he shouted.

“In the sky—overhead—look!”

He jerked his head up high. His eyes smarted from the heat and brightness of the explosion, and he wanted to squeeze his eyes tight shut against the glare, but he forced himself to look through the veil of spurting tears—what was that tiny black object silhouetted against the burning, bursting free of the flames, arrowed at the stars? “They’re escaping!” he cried, angry. “We’ve failed. It’s the outline of a skyfighter, Murasaki must have managed to make it out before the reactor burst.”

“No! It’s not true! Look, there, streaming from the castle, down the steps, down the mountainside like swarms of ants . . . people! They have been liberated!”

Schwabauer saw. But he did not believe. His heart was heavy. “I have seen so

much suffering,” he told her. “I saw the Nazi horror as a child; as an adult, researching the hill tribes of Southeast Asia, I saw more war and more horror. And now I see horror fall from the very skies, from that very outer space on which once all our human hopes and aspirations depended! I don’t believe in freedom anymore.”

“Don’t give up hope,” Setsuko said. But he could see care behind her well-practiced smile. *The Japanese always smile, he thought, when they are delivering bad news; it is against their code of good manners to frown when doing so, because it is improper to inflict one’s own anguish on another. What a strange people.* There she stood, this woman who had in all probability lost her lover. Yet she was still trying to preserve propriety; she did not seem at all distraught.

Suddenly Schwabauer saw another skyfighter emerge from the flames . . . then another! “There are more of them. We’ve accomplished nothing at all—”

“No!” Setsuko said. “Look, they are fighting!”

It was true. Lines of blue laser light zapped across the night sky. The skyfighters zoomed skyward, arcing, somersaulting wildly as they dodged each other’s fire. “I can’t tell who is on whose side!” he screamed. Roaring filled the sky. It came from the crowds who were even now running down the narrow road, sprinting across the paddy fields. Many wore martial arts uniforms of an unusual and terrifying variety; they had bright orange headbands and tunics that bore that ominous symbol of the Visitors. But they did not have the joyless look of the converted. They were shouting all at once, chaotically. In a few moments they would reach the place where he and Setsuko stood. Who were those skyfighters? A burst of thunder from the sky. He saw the crowd stop and turn their eyes skyward.

“One of them is fending off two others!” Setsuko said. “That one must be *our* people! They must have captured a skyfighter!”

Could it be true? Schwabauer did not dare believe there was a chance that his friends could have escaped. And yet, what else could it be? There had been four of them against an entire castle. Suddenly one of the attackers blew up. Pieces of bright metal flashed in the sky like a meteor shower. The crowd cried out and began to cheer. “I was right!” Setsuko said. “One for the humans!” In his

excitement, he hugged the woman, and her delicate fragrance filled his nostrils, driving out the acrid odor of burning wood and flesh that wafted from the castle.

The two skyfighters circled each other like matched hawks. For a long moment each seemed in a kind of stasis, each hovered, defying gravity, unmoving against the starstream. Then—

One of the craft—was it theirs? *Lieber Gott*, he hoped it was theirs—was hit by a bolt of blue lightning. For another split second it remained motionless . . . then it began to plummet toward the inferno beneath. An ear-splitting boom rent the air as it crashed and splintered. Fire ran down the staircases, with their carved balustrades, that zigzagged up and down the side of the castle. The heat was unbearable. Sweat mingled with his tears.

The surviving skyfighter changed direction. It gathered speed; a faint whine, a low thrum, and it was soaring across the moon's face, a comet-tail streaming behind, an arclike smear of light. In spite of the terror and the bloodshed, it was a sight of such profound beauty, such mystery, that Schwabauer could not help but be moved by it. Impulsively, he clasped Setsuko's hand tight. It was warm and moist.

"It was *our* fighter!" he whispered.

"I ... I don't know. But I dare ... I dare hope. I have to!" she said urgently. "If we have no hope we might as well crawl away and die."

"They got away," he repeated, believing more fiercely now. Once he had had faith. But that was a long time ago, when he was a child, before the first of three long and terrible wars he had lived through. He had lost his faith the first time around, when he saw the cathedral of his home city smashed by the bombs of justice. That was why he had turned to anthropology; he had developed an obsessive desire to learn all about man's mysteries, about what made men do such awful things to one another. "They got away!" He said it over and over like a litany, for he had once found comfort in those Latin formulas in his boyhood.

"Yes. They did. You can hear it in the crowd's rejoicing," Setsuko said.

"Once ... in the cathedral at Dresden ... I was a choirboy. Did you know that? I used to believe so fervently—"

“I’m telling you, Karl! They got away!”

He broke out of his trance-like state. The crowd was nearer now. He heard the pounding of their feet. They seemed to be singing. The sound burst forth from a thousand throats. A vast, elemental roaring, like a typhoon or an erupting volcano.

“You see?” Setsuko screamed. He saw her mouth move, barely heard her over the singing.

“We must go on,” he said. After the turbulence of his outrage had come a quiet elation. He was calm now. “We must drive on toward the castle. Perhaps one of our friends didn’t make it through. Perhaps someone needs our help. Come, Setsuko.”

They got back into the car. Even with the windows closed tight, they could scarcely hear each other talk. Setsuko began to pull out boxes of equipment from the back seat: first-aid kits, two guns, an oxygen mask with a small tank of the life-giving gas, and a rubbery, wrinkled sheet of some clear material, neatly folded.

“And what is that?” Schwabauer said as they pulled back onto the road.

“It is one of those thermal pressure skins that the lizards have been using to protect themselves from the red dust. You know? Fieh Chan, the brilliant and cruel commander, is said to have invented it. I have been experimenting on it.”

“Why did you bring it with you?”

“Oh, nothing. A hunch, Professor,” she said calmly.

“Stop there,” Setsuko cried out as they lurched up and down the hilly streets, getting nearer and nearer to the castle, the burning mountain. “I think there’s something wrong. Look, up there, by that temple.”

They screeched to a halt.

In the moonlight, and by the light of Osaka Castle’s destruction, Schwabauer saw a low temple wall; within it were the pointed eaves of a Shinto shrine. The crowd was pressing against the opening, trying to enter. A single monk was

trying to fend them off. “What are they doing?” Schwabauer said. “They seem out for blood.”

They got out of the car and started to push their way through the crowd. “What’s wrong?” he cried. No one seemed to notice him, so intent were they at trying to break into the temple.

They were all pointing at the temple roof now, chanting in unison, “***Bijitaa da! Bijitaa da!***” He knew what it meant. For ***bijitaa*** was the Japanese pronunciation of the word ***Visitor***, the most terrifying word in the world. Seizing Setsuko’s hand, he propelled himself deeper into the mob, elbowing people out of the way. A child sobbed somewhere. A woman shrieked shrill imprecations, shaking her fist at whatever was up there on the roof.

“***Um Gottes Willen***, let us through!” Schwabauer screamed, exasperated. Never in his life had he seen so vicious a crowd before . . . except once, long ago, as a child, one night: the night his parents had joined the mob that razed the Jewish neighborhood of his home town. What a terrifying memory! He tried to push it away. ***I am an American now***, he told himself. “What could be up there?”

Setsuko screamed, “It’s Sugihara! The swordmaster!” He looked at the roof. There he was . . . running across the roof, his sixteenth-century samurai costume glittering, his sword catching the light—his face the face of a reptile! “They think he’s a lizard because of our disguises. We have to get to him before they lynch him,” she said.

“How will we get through these people?”

“The car. We’ll have to crash the wall! Come, it’s only wood.”

They dove back into the crush, fighting the sea of arms and legs, until they reached the camouflaged Toyota. Someone had broken the windshield with a rock. “They think we are lizards too, because of our disguised car,” he said. “We must move quickly!” They jumped in, the glass shards lacerating his skin and shredding his trousers. How could Setsuko maintain such elegant composure? he thought for a moment, watching her face in the moonlight. A trickle of blood ran down her pale features, like wine drops on a porcelain goblet. Then he started the car, turned, aimed it directly at the wall of the temple—and peeled out!

People ran screaming on either side. But he couldn't stop. He braced himself as they smashed through the wall. Wood and plaster scattered. Splinters showered them.

"There!" Setsuko said. "Around the side!" He could see Sugihara crawling along a ledge. A stone flew up and glanced off the swordmaster's katana. It clinked as it skimmed the rooftiles. "There. A drainage pipe," she said. He saw it, glinting against the dark wood. "He's faint ... he looks as if he's dying!" she said.

From beyond the wall came the roar of the angry crowd.

"No time," he said.

They pulled up against the drainage pipe. "You just destroyed one of the most famous rock gardens in Japan," Setsuko whispered as the car skidded on gravel, and stones flew over the courtyard of the temple.

So I too am like the ones who burned the Jewish neighborhood, the ones who bombed the cathedral—like all men—a destroyer! he thought, hating himself. Then he saw Kenzo Sugihara trying to climb down towards them. Halfway down, he began to slide, unable to keep his grip. "He's very weak," said Schwabauer. "I think he's dying."

They ran to where he lay in the gravel. The moonlight shone on the swordmaster's features.

Something about his features—

"That's not one of our disguises," Setsuko whispered. "He's a ***real*** alien!"

"Yes . . . help me ... I am not your enemy . . ." said the alien. He seemed to be succumbing to the red dust, but agonizingly slowly. "I was thrown clear by the blast, I crashed into the field beside this temple ... I assure you that I *am* Kenzo Sugihara . . . my thermal pressure skin has not yet dissolved, because I was thrown free before the enzyme could act on it . . . but it is weakening ... I am dying, slowly dying."

"It's Kenzo," Setsuko said. "I was his lover. I know him, even though he comes to us in the shape of a reptile."

“What do you mean?” said Schwabauer, astonished.

“I mean,” she said, pulling the pressure skin from the car and throwing it over the injured saurian so that it began bonding to his flesh, “that I have always known how alien the mysterious swordmaster who helped you Americans really was. I always knew that he was Fieh Chan—” “The lizard commander!” Schwabauer said incredulously.

“—a secret adept of *preta-na-ma*, a creature torn between two worlds and two identities! We must save him.”

“Are you telling me that Kenzo Sugihara, the swordmaster who saved the lives of the Americans time and time again, is also ... the commander of the Eastern Sector of the lizard fleet?” Schwabauer shook his head ruefully. “It’s hard to believe.” “Help me with him.”

He and the woman lifted up the body and laid it down on the back seat. Sugihara stirred. “Tomoko

. . . Matt ... do they live?” he whispered.

“I think they fled in a skyfighter,” said Schwabauer, trying to reassure him. Could he be one of the evil ones, if he expressed concern over the resistance fighters like that?

“Quick,” Setsuko said. “We must flee. Or they’ll know we have him!”

“Shouldn’t we kill him?” Schwabauer said. But he knew even as he said it that it was useless to kill. He would become even as they, even as the monstrous combatants in the many wars he had endured. Starting the car, he said, “No. You are sure he is on our side?”

“As sure as it is humanly possible,” she said. “You love him!” said Schwabauer.

“Yes,” she said defiantly. “Is that wrong? Yes. I protected his secret. I had to show him I trusted him. Please, Dr. Schwabauer, let’s go now!”

The crowd was jamming in through the sundered temple walls now. If they didn’t leave they’d all die. He gunned the accelerator and they were off, weaving wildly through the temple compound, trying to find a different gate. At last they

found a road. Members of the crowd were trying to throw themselves on the car, shouting “Death to the Visitors!” in a raucous, terrifying chant. Faster, faster, he thought, as they speeded ahead. The speedometer hit 120 kilometers per hour, then 160. The road was narrow, but the moonlight and the exploding castle in the distance illuminated its reflective surface, and it was like a silver thread that sutured the black night.

“We’ve lost them,” he said at last, as they turned onto the highway that led towards the safety of Tokyo. “Now will you tell me what’s going on?”

“He’s coming to now,” Setsuko said, after they had been on the road for about an hour.

“I still want an explanation,” he said. The moon had set. They sped past picturesque villages, and mountains terraced with paddy fields. He looked in the rear view mirror and saw that the lizard was sitting up now. The eyes glowed like topazes. That was what was truly alien about these creatures. You couldn’t read their eyes.

“I will tell you,” said the lizard who had been both Kenzo Sugihara and Fieh Chan, the fearsome saurian commander. “But first, you must know that the mission was a success; all the leaders of the Eastern Sector are now fried in the rubble, victims of their own lust for power. As for the resistance fighters from America, I simply don’t know.”

“As I told you,” Schwabauer said, “I think they may be safe.” They were silent a while: they crossed a bridge and watched a lone fisherman asleep on his boat, a pointy straw hat covering his features. Rooftops in the valley beyond: tiles glinting like the scales of a dragon.

Setsuko said, “I have always known that he was an alien: the finest of all fifth columnists, for he had been able to climb almost to the very top of the alien hierarchy.”

“Both my old identities are useless now,” said the alien sadly.

“And I have bad news for all of us,” Setsuko said. “I have been doing some research on the red dust, and I’ve found that it is not ... as effective as we thought it would be. When the cold weather comes, the microorganisms that give it its toxic power will hibernate and grow strong, and renew themselves; but in

warmer climes this will not happen. Then —they will return!”

“Will it never end?” said Schwabauer. “Something must be done,” said the alien swordmaster. “I believe that it is America they will strike the hardest, because of that nation’s technology and because there are vast tracts of territory there that are not subject to harsh winters, and where they will be able to set up bases. As soon as I have recovered from this sickness wrought in me by the red dust, I will return there. I won’t see my friends be made into converts—or worse, into food! Though I am a reptile myself, I am ashamed of the evil perpetrated by my planet’s leaders. It goes against the precepts of *preta-na-ma*, the most sacred of our beliefs. Oh, they tried to ban the old, strong religion, but it lives on. I am heartsick, my friends. Will you come with me to America? Will you help cure the Earth of this terrible visitation?” “You know,” Setsuko said, “that I will always come with you. Besides, I will be able to share the results of my research into alien biochemistry with other scientists there. Perhaps we will come up with something new.”

“How can I trust you?” Schwabauer said. “I don’t trust people easily . . . and you’re not even a human being.”

“But you have trusted me in the past,” said the alien swordmaster, “before you saw my true face.

Can the difference between scales and fur override what is in our hearts? Believe me, Dr. Schwabauer, as Setsuko does already. I do not fight your kind: I fight only evil, whether that evil be human or alien.”

Professor Schwabauer was moved by the swordmaster’s words. For so long he had wanted to believe in the brotherhood of man and alien; but he had been contradicted by cruel reality at every turn. “You are noble,” he said softly.

“In all the creatures of the universe,” said the swordmaster, “there is good.”

“After all that has happened—after the horrors of this invasion, after the ruthless extermination of one sentient race by another—you still believe this thing?” Schwabauer said.

“I do.”

“Then I will come with you ... I *must* come with you.”

He thought of the resistance fighters who had fought the aliens here in Japan: Tomoko Jones, the half-Japanese anthropologist he'd trained himself, so unsure of her identity; Matt, her husband, the swaggering ninjitsu expert in whom this conflict had awakened a new tenderness; Chris Baer, the young boy who had lost everything and then gained new parents and new hope; and Sugihara himself, a compassionate soul in a nest of soulless killers. How they had all been transformed by their harrowing experiences! Middle-class Americans, transmuted into heroes. Must it take so much suffering to make men rise above themselves?

"Yes," he said softly. "We will go to America.

When they come again, we'll be ready."

And he thought of the skyfighter that had burst free from the hell of Osaka Castle . . . and hope stirred in his heart at last. He knew that, with the breakdown in communication between the countries of the world, it might be a long time before they reached America, before he could see his beloved friends again. But he would see them, he swore to himself. And they would stand together once more, ail of them, facing the dark forces from the stars.

PART 1

DIANA THE HUNTRESS

Chapter 1

Orange County, California: one year later

“Hand me another nail,” Matt Jones hollered to Tomoko. She climbed up the ladder and watched as he pounded another plank over the main entryway of what had once been the Matt Jones Institute of Martial Arts, the main attraction of the decaying Haataja Shopping Plaza. She put a handful of nails in his outstretched hand.

“It’s hard to believe that we’re actually leaving,” she said.

Bang. Bang. Bang. “What?” he shouted.

“I said, I can’t believe we’re going!”

“We have to go. For CB’s sake.” He stopped pounding for a moment. The warm California sun beat down on both of them. From halfway up the ladder, she watched thirteen-year-old Chris Baer (nicknamed CB), their adopted son, hauling a box of clothes into the back of their Chevy van. Matt continued, between hammerings, “Since Nathan Bates’s death, the riots have become intolerable. I don’t want our kid to grow up in this kind of world,

Tomoko, and I’m tired of fighting those goddamn lizards. Last year we followed them to their very lair in Japan, we smoked them out and drove them away . . . and today they’re back, powerful as ever, cruel as ever. I can’t stand it. We’ve gotta get to the free states somehow—even if we die trying. Even if we’re only free for a few days.”

Tomoko shuddered, knowing the perilous journey they’d have to undertake. Somewhere to the east, people said, there was a loose association of states that were free of the aliens’ curse; their harsh winters made the red dust stronger every year, and it was still death for a Visitor to go there. At first they’d thought of going up to Washington State or Idaho; but the northern border was very strictly guarded. They’d have to flee east and then north, trying to lose the Visitors in the endless deserts before thrusting up beyond the Appalachians.

The van had been disguised to look like one of the Visitor vehicles. Members of

the local resistance had supplied them with three Visitor uniforms pilfered from the skyfighter which she and Matt had captured and brought back to Los Angeles. Alas, that skyfighter was no longer operational, for several parts had malfunctioned and the resistance technicians had been unable to find replacements. But at least they had the uniforms, and they had their dermoplast disguises, the imitation saurian faces which they had worn when they infiltrated Osaka Castle one year before. CB was putting them into the van at that very moment.

, At last Matt finished boarding up the institute

and they both climbed down the ladder into the plaza. “Are we all packed?” he called out to CB.

“Just a couple more boxes,” the boy said, coming up to them. “We can blow in, like, fifteen minutes. Like, I’m totally psyched.”

He’s grown taller in the past year, Tomoko thought. Soon he’ll start thinking about girls all the time. Matt’s right. We can’t let him grow up in this hell.

“You don’t feel bad about leaving our home behind?” she said to him.

“No way,” he said, idly brushing back his spiked blond hair with one hand, and carefully adjusting his neon-pink leather tie with the other, making sure it was properly askew in the manner now fashionable with teenagers. At first, she’d been a little alarmed at CB’s “new wave” affectations; but after a while she realized it was just a harmless fad. The boy went on, “Are we really going all the way to Washington, D.C.?”

“If we make it,” Matt said despondently. He went over to the van and, with a small can of black enamel, carefully retouched the Visitor logo that adorned the door. The Visitors never seemed to have any worn-looking artifacts. Not for them the battered jalopy or the rundown gas guzzler; with them everything was always squeaky-clean.

“Aren’t you being a bit overcautious?” Tomoko said, watching him.

“They’d notice instantly, I’m sure, if the insignia were a little faded.”

“Yeah,” CB said. “Those lizards are sticklers.”

From the Chinese restaurant across the plaza emerged an older, balding man, struggling with some brown packages.

“Sam,” Tomoko said. “What are you doing with all that stuff?”

“You need food,” he said. “You go away forever? I make great food for you: *ho fan* ... in this box two Peking ducks. I made too many by mistake. You take, Tomoko, Matt, CB. Theresa says she too sad to say goodbye.”

Tomoko saw the face of Sam’s wife in the window of Po Sam’s restaurant. Suddenly she didn’t want to go at all. “They’re our friends!” she said, almost weeping.

“One day we will meet again,” Sam said. He thrust the packages into the back of the van;

Tomoko could smell the mingled fragrances of Sam’s exotic cooking. She knew he hadn’t made two extra Peking ducks by mistake.

“Yes, we’ll meet,” she said, unable to meet his eyes.

“Hey, Matt, hey, Tomoko!” CB cried out. “Someone’s coming!”

A car was pulling into the plaza; a rare occasion, since no one frequented this shopping center any more, and Matt had announced the closure of his academy some weeks ago.

“My god,” Matt said. “It’s Julie Parrish. What can she want?”

Matt watched as Julie approached them. Sam, too overcome by emotion to stay any longer, had gone back into the dingy diner where Matt and the others had first planned their assault on the lizards in Japan. Julie was worried, obviously. Her blonde hair was in disarray, and her beautiful eyes were sad. Before she could speak, Matt said, “You shouldn’t have come, Juliet. You know we’ve made up our minds.”

“I don’t blame you,” Juliet Parrish said. “I don’t know why anyone would want to stay here, now that Nathan’s dead, now that riots are ravaging downtown Los Angeles, and the reptile contingent is out in force, raping, killing, devouring ... oh, it’s horrible, Matt. The freeway was a sea of bodies.

I had to crash through a lizard checkpoint, and ... I zigzagged through the surface streets, and I think I threw them off the trail, but I don't know how long for."

"Well! That's a hell of a way to start my escape! Thanks a whole lot," Matt said.

"Wait, this is important—" Juliet began.

"Right now, nothing is more important to me than the protection of my family, and getting out of here with our skins intact," Matt said. "I've paid my dues to the resistance."

"Yes, you have," Julie said. Her eyes began to water a little, and Matt immediately regretted his angry outburst. But they still had to get out of there fast.

"Well, say what you've come to say. I've gotta split," he said.

Julie said, "Well, our intelligence has gotten wind of a new development in the lizards' technology ... a new, artificially created super-heavy metal called papinium."

"What does it do?" CB said, interested suddenly.

"That's the bad news," said Julie. "A thin coating of this metal, say on an armored vehicle or even something larger, and they think the lizards might be able to penetrate into regions where the red dust is still active."

"Holy shit," said CB. "Then even the free states—"

"Won't be free anymore!" Matt said bitterly. "And our entire odyssey will become senseless."

"How far along is this technology?" Tomoko said.

"We don't know! But we think that they are manufacturing it in secret somewhere in the noman's land between the free states and the Visitor-occupied territory ... in the Carolinas maybe, or in southern Virginia. That's why your flight eastward has suddenly become of critical importance to the survival of the human race—"

“Oh no,” Matt said. “No you don’t! No more heroics.”

“It’s nothing like that. We don’t have any plan, any undercover mission. It’s just that, maybe, forearmed with this information, you might be able to find scientists out east who could help us. Here,” she said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a lump of shiny metal, bluish-silver in hue. “This is the only sample we’ve managed to obtain. If you could take it and—”

“I’m not touching it with a ten-foot pole!” Matt said.

“Please!” said Juliet Parrish.

He saw the desperation in her eyes. Wildly he turned to look at his wife and kid. “I guess I’m going to say yes,” he said. Tomoko nodded, approving. “Goddamn heroics.” He took the nugget and tossed it to CB. Julie started to protest and then sighed in relief when CB caught it and pocketed it.

“Hey,” he said, “I think it would make a radical ear cuff.”

“Don’t you dare,” Matt said. Julie looked as though she were about to say something more, so he went on, “Do you have more disaster to report?” “I do have good news too,” she said. “Maybe. Don’t you three know this German-American anthropology professor, used to teach at USC, was in Japan for a while?”

“Of course we know him!” Matt said. “He helped us immeasurably in our battle against the forces of Lady Murasaki. I think he’s dead; when we returned to Tokyo in our captured skyfighter, we couldn’t find him anywhere, and the laboratory where we’d left our friends behind was completely deserted.” It was a painful memory; he was angry at Julie for forcing him to relive it.

“Well, there’s a remote chance Professor Schwabauer may still be alive. We’ve been monitoring some of the lizard communications; there’s an order out to kill him. They’re sending some converted hit man out to rub him out right now.” “Where?” Tomoko said anxiously.

“If it’s the same Dr. Schwabauer—and it’s not a very common name—he’s hanging around Washington, D.C., right now, giving lectures on the habits of the aliens and briefing prospective resistance members.”

“Washington!” Matt said. “But that’s where we’re going!”

“If it’s the same guy, and he hasn’t been killed by the time you get there, he can probably help us find someone who can work with that papinium sample,” Julie said. “For god’s sake, CB, take care of the damn thing!”

“For sure,” CB said, juggling it back and forth with an action figure he’s pulled from a pocket of his pants. Juliet looked at him nervously, but didn’t comment. *She’s really desperate*, Matt thought.

“Good luck,” Julie said at last. Impulsively, she hugged him and Tomoko and CB; then she was off, her green Mazda with its dented front fender roaring as she turned onto Spruce Street.

“Why did I do that?” Matt said furiously. “I don’t want anything to do with the resistance again! I just want to get out of here.”

“Hush, Matt,” Tomoko said gently. They didn’t exchange any more words as they boarded the van, changed into the hated alien uniforms, and started moving toward the freeway.

“Oh, Jesus,” Matt said, slamming on the brakes only a few miles down the freeway. The traffic was at a standstill. “Another lizard barricade. There’s nothing for it but to sweat it out.”

“Look!” CB said. “They’re waving us over to the shoulder.”

Matt honked his horn and made what he thought was an arrogant face. Terrified, the cars around him scrunched closer together, so that he was able to worm his way around them. A Visitor vehicle was parked; two Visitors were standing by the side of the road, angrily interrogating those who drove by.

Rolling down his window, Matt said, “We’re on an urgent mission. Have to get to ... to headquarters.”

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” said a young man in uniform. This wasn’t an alien; it had to be one of those converted people. His eyes were dead and stared straight ahead. Matt tried to control his features, and to project his voice through the synthesizer attachment hidden in the collar of his uniform.

“How dare you!” he barked. The voice was harsh, metallic, startling even himself. “Don’t you realize who I am?”

“I’m sorry,” the converted recruit said, flinching. “We’re looking for a green Mazda. Have you seen it, sir?”

“You have the nerve to call me over and bother me with such trivialities?”

“But sir, it’s not that trivial! We have reason to think the driver may be the resistance leader Juliet Parrish, and that she may be carrying a sample of p-p-papinium!”

Thinking quickly, Matt rasped, “You idiot! We were pursuing that car ourselves . . . and you’ve prevented us from performing our duty! Let us through at once—unless you want to join me for dinner tonight,” he added menacingly.

Backing away in terror, the convert began to direct traffic madly to clear a space for Matt’s van. When there was enough room to move, Matt rammed his foot down on the accelerator and wove

quickly through the stalled traffic.

“That was close!” CB said as they drove down a clear stretch of highway. “How far away is Washington?”

“Are you kidding? It’ll be days before we get there,” Tomoko said.

“I keep thinking about what Julie said,” Matt said, “about Professor Schwabauer. Do you think it’s true?”

“If he’s alive,” Tomoko said, “then *anything’s* possible. Perhaps even the alien swordmaster is still alive—”

“He’s history,” CB said sadly. “Like we saw him dying, remember, the red dust getting to him? He’s dead, Tomoko.”

“We saw him dying,” she said, “but we didn’t see him dead. Maybe the blast threw him clear and—”

“Ridiculous,” Matt said. “Anyway, he’d have succumbed to the red dust soon

after that. His thermal pressure skin was dissolving . . . poor guy. He loved you, Tomoko. He gave up his life for all of us, but especially for you, I think.” Matt did not voice his jealousy of the alien first known as Fieh Chan, then as Kenzo Sugihara. But he had felt threatened by this swordsman of dazzling skill who had won not only Tomoko’s affection but also the hero-worship of young CB. What terrible thoughts! He shouldn’t think ill of the dead. Seriously he drove on, not speaking. The others, cowed by his dark mood, stared intently at the road as the scenery flashed endlessly by . . . abandoned suburbs, gutted shopping malls, the rubble of bombed skyscrapers ... all the debris of the alien conquest and of the terrible riots that were even now tearing apart the inhabitants of Greater Los Angeles.

“Oh, it’s so horrible,” Tomoko said. He did not look her in the eyes, but he knew that she must be weeping. He felt her head on his shoulder; felt the kid’s hands too, lightly resting on his neck from the back seat; he drew comfort from the closeness of his strange family.

“Easy,” he said, “easy. We’re leaving all this behind for good.”

In the rear view mirror he saw that CB was gazing, almost hypnotized, at the lump of papinium Julie had given them. Foreboding touched him, but he tried to shrug it off.

“Three, four days to freedom,” he said softly. “Freedom!” Tomoko said. And she began to sob now, and he felt her warm tears in his hair, and he wanted to cry too; but he was too angry at what the aliens had done to all of them.

“Arizona soon,” he said. “In a few more hours.” CB slept.

The young converted recruit trembled in the presence of the Visitor, his superior officer. “But they told me—”

“Nonsense!” said the Visitor furiously as the recruit slipped in beside him in the front seat of the vehicle. “The reports clearly indicate that no vehicle like theirs was sent out in pursuit of . . . unless they’re resistance fighters! Describe them!”

“One was an oriental woman; then there was this blond kid with sort of a punk haircut. But they were wearing Visitor uniforms!”

“1 suspect ... I don’t know what. Where are they heading?”

“Eastward on Route 10.”

“Ha! Toward Arizona!” said the Visitor. “I think—”

“Shall I file a report, sir?”

“No, you idiot! Have you no idea how things work among us Visitors? If we file, it’ll be out of our hands and there’ll be no room for advancement. I think I’ll just send word ahead to . . . one of the Arizona officers. We’ll meet in the middle, catch them, and get all the credit between us; there’s no point in alerting any higher authority* Besides, it may well be nothing.”

“Yes, sir. Shall I put through a call to the Phoenix control center, sir?”

“At once!”

“Whom shall I address it to?”

“Let me see . . . oh, yes, Phoenix . . . that would be Medea. She was demoted to a mere city commander after her disastrous failure with that Florida project. She’ll be delighted at chance to look good in Diana’s eyes. We’ll all benefit from this . . . if it’s not a false alarm. If it is . . . well, you see why we shouldn’t get excited. It’d be our heads if Diana got involved and it turned out to be something stupid.”

“Yes, sir. Medea, sir. At once, sir,” said the young recruit, relieved that he had been at least temporarily reprieved from gracing his superior officer’s dinner table, and he reached for the communication device that depended from the dashboard of the Visitor vehicle.

He fiddled with the controls for a moment; then, after a burst of video static, the face of a beautiful woman appeared on the two-inch screen of the communicator.

“Medea,” the woman said. To the recruit’s horror, she appeared very, very displeased indeed. But as he told her his tale, her expression gradually shifted into one of deponiac glee.

Chapter 2

Phoenix, Arizona, was too insignificant a city to have a Mother Ship hovering over it. Instead, the Visitors had taken over the famed Phoenix Hilton hotel and transformed it into a control center. The huge sundeck of the hotel, where once tourists had lazed and swum and relaxed in the capacious Jacuzzi, was now the takeoff deck for the center's one skyfighter—a deficient model at that, with only one of its laser cannon working.

At least it's dry and hot, like the home planet, thought Medea, the center's commander, as she shut off the video receiver in her command chamber, a glass-walled room that overlooked the makeshift skyport. *It's bleak and searing . . . just the way I like it!* But she was just trying to convince herself. She didn't believe it for a moment. She really wanted to return to the lap of luxury, to being one of Diana's favorites once more. If only that Florida project hadn't been such an unmitigated disaster! It had almost killed her. And her present position was worse than death: to be commander of a hardship garrison, ill-equipped and low in status. Why, it

was little better than being a common recruit!

That was why it was so good that that stupid officer and his recruit had called her. What fools! Didn't they realize who their three escapees were, who they had to be?

The Jones family!

The notorious family of martial arts experts who had wrought such utter havoc in Tokyo that another fine plan had had to be abandoned: the plan of creating an entire army of soulless converts who could kill with their bare hands. And Murasaki dead now, and Wu Piao, and that double-crossing Fieh Chan disappeared no one knew where.

It had to be Matt and Tomoko Jones and their runt of a son.

Now was Medea's chance.

Forget that officer who hoped to move up a mere rung or two in the hierarchy . .

. Medea had a chance at the dizzying heights of supreme commanderhood.

Diana will listen to me now, she thought. She'll have to. And I'll be reassigned to some decent Mother Ship as commander, instead of ruling over this miserable hellhole.

She stared out over the sundeck beneath her window. Across the street was a skyscraper made of glass, like a gigantic mirror: cloud reflections scudded slowly across it, and the sun's glare seemed to bore into her artificial human eyes. If only she could remove this ape suit and appear in the full glory of her squamose beauty!

A plate of raw human hands rested at her elbow. She reached forward, took one, munched on it purposefully as she leaned back on the divan upon which she sat. She sucked the marrow and spat out the bones one by one. Delicious! She took a long draft of chilled blood from a frosted goblet, and replenished the cup from a large pitcher beside it. ***It's boredom that makes me want to eat all the time,*** she thought. ***I thank the supreme saurian that something exciting is finally happening! It will help me watch my weight. This world is just too full of rich, luxurious foods.*** She threw away the hand and selected another, gnawing greedily at it.

No use putting it off any further! she told herself at last, and reached over to the console on her coffee table. On the far wall, a monitor beeped and a test signal became visible. "Get me the Los Angeles Mother Ship," she said. "I want a direct line to Diana herself!"

After a pause, she found herself looking into the face of the supreme commander. Beautiful and utterly deadly, Medea thought.

"So," Diana said, her eyes darting scornfully over her colleague's surroundings. "Eating again! Don't bother me. We've important business here, what with the riots over the death of Nathan Bates. I haven't any time to talk to you."

"You've plenty of time for that Lydia," Medea said, allowing a twinge of jealousy to show through. "Tell me what you want. I haven't got all day." "I've news . . . news that will stir even you to action, Diana. The Jones family happens to be fleeing into my jurisdiction."

"If this is some sort of hoax—"

“Nothing of the kind!” Medea began to describe what the officer had told her.

“It *sounds* plausible,” said Diana.

“Why would they do that?” Medea said. “It’s certain death, after all. Isn’t it?”

“Medea darling,” Diana said, with more than a hint of menace in her voice, “you never seem to learn about these humans, do you? They love to die. Especially when there’s some principle involved: truth, or justice, or whatever. Rather amusing, really.”

Medea was used to being the butt of Diana’s humor. She stiffened, but suffered in silence, for Diana was the key to her reinstatement. And perhaps, one day, she would even be able to manipulate the powers on the home planet . . . and get herself made Diana’s replacement! Better to go along with things for now. Until a chance to strike back. Which would be very soon, Medea thought, chuckling inwardly.

“You don’t say anything?” Diana said. “I suppose you’re just waiting for me to send out a fleet of skyfighters to bail you out. You’re afraid to take on a mere three human beings. You are a complete failure, Medea dear. You should have stayed home and joined that dreadful *preta-na-ma* sect.”

“Come now! Humor’s one thing, but you don’t have to be vulgar. Besides, I intend to capture the creatures myself. You will have their heads. My word on it!”

Diana cackled hideously. “That’s the old Medea,” she said. “Perhaps, if you succeed, we may . . . reconsider your position,” she added with much-belabored casualness.

“You might want to send me a properly functional skyfighter,” Medea said, pressing her luck.

“No! We need them all here. You’ll just have to use what you’ve got. Now go! There’s a limit to my patience. I told you I was busy.”

Diana’s image vanished from the viewscreen.

Medea looked at the plate. She’d finished off all the food without even noticing

it. She hated Diana with all her heart; not least because, in exchange for appointing Medea as a commander, she had taken advantage of her position as superior officer to inflict her loathsome caresses on her junior. Not that Medea was above using sex herself for political ends. But she preferred cleaner, more classical methods. Like assassination. Or even promotion by combat. Sex was too devious. It was almost as bad as thinking. She remembered what had happened to that Fieh Chan, her classmate at the military academy on the homeworld, when he had started to think too much. He'd gone crazy, gotten hoodwinked by that **preta-na-ma** garbage . . . and now he was dead.

A fate which Medea did not intend to befall herself.

She wondered whether she should call in the steward, a loyal convert, and have him go down into the kitchens for more food. But no. It was time for business.

Rousing herself from her lethargy, she summoned a technician to ready the skyfighter into at least manageable condition. ***I won't fly it myself***, she thought. ***It's just too rickety. I'll make some underling take all the risks.***

After all, I wouldn't want to Injure a being who might one day become supreme commander of this planet!

Chapter 3

Endless desert, desolate, uninhabited. But, Tomoko thought, there was a kind of bleak beauty to it. The sun was setting over distant mountains, and the sky was streaked with brooding crimson. “Can we stop?” she said. They had changed drivers; she had been going for about five hours now, and was getting tired.

“Can I drive?” CB piped up from the back.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Tomoko said.

“Let him,” said Matt. “There’s nobody on the road. Who gives a damn anymore? You think the traffic cops are going to stop an official lizard vehicle?”

“I guess not,” Tomoko said. “But—”

“C’mon, Mom,” CB said. On the rare occasions when he called her that she never knew what to think; it confused her. Abruptly, she brought the car to a halt beside an embankment of sand dotted with monstrous cacti, their twisty shapes dark against the sunset. They seemed like prehistoric monsters, like nightmares. CB said, “I can drive good, Tomoko.”

Why not? she thought. After all, Matt had taught him all he knew of ninjitsu and other martial arts; surely driving a car couldn’t require any more coordination than one of those complicated moves! She looked at Matt; Matt shrugged and said, “You’re the boss.”

“No, you are,” she said.

“You are.”

“You are.”

They kissed for a long moment. Was this what freedom was all about? she thought. Desperately she clung to him. “Oh, it’s so desolate here,” she said, “we’re alone together, just us against ... so much ... so many more miles to go.” And she kissed him again and again.

At long last she felt a sharp prod in her back. “Hey, dudes, cut it out, huh? Like,

if we don't blow we'll get totally boned."

They broke apart. "Sure," Tomoko said, "let the kid drive. We'll just get in the back seat."

"Thanks a million," CB said sarcastically, "for letting me drive just so you two can get it on! Just call me Mr. Chauffeur." He slid the van door open and started to clamber out.

"I hope you've still got that papinium nugget," Tomoko said, panicking a little.

"Oh, that blue shiny lump? I've been having a lot of fun with it. It's, like, totally malleable, you know? Look at this!" He pulled a flat sheet out of his pocket.

"That used to be a lump and now it's square. I did it with my bare hands. But it's hard as shit at the same time."

Tomoko said, taking it and feeling its oddly slippery texture, "Weird. You know, I remember back when I did physics in college, they talked about how one day they might be able to synthesize super-heavy elements with really high atomic numbers, and how they'd be much more stable than the radioactive ones around 100, 101 . . . and have bizarre properties like supermalleability. . .

"What are you talking about?" said Matt, who had always had this problem with her college degrees.

"I think she means," said CB, "that this stuff will stretch and stretch into a covering maybe one or two molecules thick, but it'll be, like, totally impermeable to the red dust, because a bacterium is a whole lot bigger than one or two molecules, so it won't be able to penetrate the mesh of particles. Kind of like a mosquito net."

"I see," said Matt. "Thank you for putting it into terms even an airhead like me can understand."

"Such self-awareness!" Tomoko kidded. They embraced again. Tomoko had not felt such love for him since the days of their courtship. Was it the loneliness of the desert? Or was it the terrible feeling that this happiness could never last? She could not tell. ***I have to accept this love as a gift, she thought, and ask no questions.*** That was what her mother would have told her, she was sure, her mother who had endured so much abuse from the macho, all-American husband.

But then, that was why she had married Matt; she saw in him a little of her father.

“Ahem,” CB said, startling her. He put out his hand to take back the papinium sample, waited for

Tomoko and Matt to climb into the back of the van, and sat down proudly at the wheel. “Shit!” he said suddenly.

“What?” Matt said.

“I can’t reach the pedals.”

“Are you sure he can—” Tomoko began.

“Oh, yeah,” Matt said. “Here,” he rooted around behind the back seat, where all their belongings were piled up, “use one of these books.” He handed them across. “Just slip them under your foot.” “Wait a minute, those are *my* books,” Tomoko said in alarm.

CB looked them over before he carefully positioned them: “Chill! Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy, Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun* . . . sci-fi stuff.” “They happen to be very important books,” Tomoko said.

“We don’t need science fiction anymore,” Matt said, “we’re living it now.”

On this grim note they started out again. Tomoko relaxed in Matt’s comforting arms, lulled by the humming of the van as it rushed down the empty freeway.

Suddenly, looking up, she noticed that the scenery was going by rather faster than it should have been. Was it her imagination, or did that cactus—what cactus? “Have you checked the speedometer?” she said to Matt.

Matt groaned sleepily. “What speedometer?” She sat bolt upright. It was very dark now. She looked across at the dashboard. “You slow down this minute, CB!” she said.

“Huh?” he looked around.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” She reached across and tried to grab the steering

wheel.

“Relax, To'moko, it's casual,” he said. To her horror she noticed that they were going at over a hundred miles an hour—and that the accelerator had been jammed down with a pile of science fiction hardcovers—and that CB was sitting crosslegged on the front seat in the lotus position! “Stop the car!” she screamed.

“Hey, don't worry about it,” CB said. “Matt taught me how to do this.”

She shook Matt. “Have you been corrupting our son?” she said.

“Well, I *have* been giving the kid driving lessons,” Matt said. “And it's natural for guys to want to drive fast. To quote John Wayne, ‘A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do,’ right? Hey, you want to get to Washington, don't you?”

“In one piece!”

“Like, it's casual,” CB said. He made no move to slow down.

After a moment, Tomoko noticed a strange flashing in the night sky. A sudden illumination that swept across the landscape, making it glitter . . . almost as though they were on some alien planet. “It's beautiful,” she said.

“Huh?” Matt said, stirring from slumber.

“That heat lightning, or chain lightning, whatever it's called. It's pretty, isn't it?”

“That's no heat lightning!” CB shrieked.

“It's too regular,” Matt said, alert suddenly. “What could it—whoa! Look there!”

A sheet of cold blue traversed the darkness . . . then, emerging from the light, a dark silhouette, like a black bird of prey ... the light slowly arcing back and forth. “A probe beam!” Matt said. “Shit, CB, step on it! Tomoko, help me get our lizard laser pistols out of the back!”

Tomoko saw the skyfighter clearly for the first time. She barely had time to scream when the first bolt of blue laser light speared the darkness, missing the van by only a few feet. “We're trapped!” she said. “God knows how many of them there are. We're virtually sitting ducks—and a teenage kid who can't even

reach the pedals is driving the van!” “Shut up and shoot,” Matt said, thrusting a heavy object into her arms.

It was one of the miniature laser cannon the resistance had captured from the aliens in one of their many skirmishes.

Chapter 4

From the relative safety of a patrol vehicle some miles away, Medea watched the entire spectacle on an enormous monitor screen. The pilot, one of the young, ill-trained riff-raff that the high command was constantly sending her, was having some trouble getting the skyfighter to do what he wanted.

“Just shoot!” Medea shrieked. “Surely you don’t need any brains for that!” Angrily, she downed her third blood cocktail. With such incompetents working for her, no wonder Diana made fun of her. But she’d show them—she’d show them! “Now what’s the matter?” she said.

The pilot’s face disappeared from the screen; it was replaced by an aerial view of the desert. The skyfighter’s probe beams lit up the road, a long silvery thing that snaked through the glistening sand. There was the offending vehicle! She saw it now, a tiny thing, moving at a mere crawl, no more than a hundred and thirty miles an hour. It had been painted to look like a Visitor vehicle, and the symbol of the Visitors’ space armada was boldly blazoned on its doors. The cheek of these mon-

strous ape-like beings, to appropriate the very insignia of the glorious empire! She fumed and drank some more. The blood raced down her parched throat, cooling her, delicate and sweet to the tongue. “Attack!” she screamed.

“I’m doing my best!” the pilot yelled back.

“Drive closer!” she said to her driver. The driver, a converted human, pulled the patrol truck out and began to steer it in the direction of the enemy van.

“They’re getting closer, commander!” he said, as a radar beep and some bright red LEDs on his console indicated their relative locations.

“Position laser cannon,” Medea grated. She sat back in her seat, glancing back and forth to the bank of video screens that filled the back wall of the patrol truck. “I intend to enjoy this spectacle,” she said, forcing her dermoplast human face into a leering rictus of a smile, a distorted parody of a human emotion.

Laser turrets slid into position on either side of the truck.

“Distance!” she cried.

“They are approximately five minutes away, Medea,” the driver said, reading the console.

“Good.”

She watched the screens for a while. The skyfighter was having some difficulty maneuvering. In the aerial view she could see brilliant lines of blue laser light criss-crossing the sand . . . damn it! Why did they have to give her trainee pilots with such terrible aim? The Chevy van cut out across the desert now, weaving in and out of view. The image transmitted from the skyfighter wavered and flickered and jerked about madly. What was going on? “Shoot,, you confounded idiot!” she shouted.

Suddenly the van sped into view, a dot on the horizon—

“Fire!” she shouted at her assistants. “Fire!”

The patrol truck shuddered as a blast of blue light shot out of one of its turrets. In the middistance, a cactus blew to smithereens, providing a momentary firework display.

“Not the cactus, stupid!”

Another burst of light.

“A hit!” the driver shouted.

“Only a glancing one,” said the officer whose finger was on the button. But she could see that the enemy van was careening wildly now, out of control perhaps.

“Medea,” came the voice of the skyfighter pilot, “I think my lasers are weakening. They haven’t been recharged in months, and—”

“Swoop down lower,” Medea said. “Hover right over them . . . like a vulture. That’ll scare them while I move in for the kill!”

She watched in the monitor as the skyfighter moved earthward and the resistance fighters’ vehicle grew larger and larger in the screen. She could see their faces

now . . . why, the driver was a mere child! Were they training their very babies to fight? What barbarians! Any other sentient race would have long since accepted their subjugation and been crushed by the Visitors' superior might, but these earthlings, these obscene-looking apes ... it was horrible to contemplate what went on in their minds. If they even **had** minds at all, that is.

There was Matt Jones, and that half-Japanese wife of his. What was that she was clutching in her hand? By the supreme saurian, it was ... it was one of those miniature laser cannon that had been missing from the L.A. Mother Ship! What impertinence! The woman was sliding open the side door of the van now, and Medea could see quite clearly that she was pointing the device at—

The patrol truck began to vibrate! The left fender was sheared off, and the laser cannon operator was dead! A greenish rheum dribbled down his neck. "I'll push the button myself," Medea said, shifting her hefty bulk over to the front and slamming her hand down hard on the button, sending laser-bursts flying over the sand dunes—missed, missed, missed! She'd always been bad at target practice, preferring to rise in the ranks of the Visitor hierarchy by sly manipulations rather than soldierly talents. She began to jab at the button fast and furiously, hoping to score a hit.

"Medea," said the pilot's voice, "I think you'd better take a look at this."

She looked up at the monitor. What was happening? The enemy was clearly visible under the skyfighter's probe beams, bathed in an eerie blue light. The side doors were cracked open; she could see Tomoko's laser device peering through. The boy was driving like a demon. But what was Matt Jones doing? He was climbing out of the other side door, clutching to his chest a strange article that looked something like a crossbow, and a bolt attached to a length of rope. What would these humans think of next?

Matt squatted on the roof now, his device pointed at the skyfighter. He was poised to shoot . . . a dart? What could he hope to achieve against a skyfighter with just a crossbow?

Jabbing the fire button a few more times for good measure—she missed every time—she called up to the skyfighter pilot, "Regain altitude. I think something fishy is happening."

"Medea, my controls are sticking! I'm stuck in the hover pattern, with the

automatic pilot homing in above the enemy vehicle!”

“Get me Diana,” Medea barked. “Now, this instant, do you hear? I want a call put through this minute. I don’t care what she’s doing. Priority one, emergency override, anything!”

Terrified, the driver hastened to obey.

At that moment, Matt fired the crossbow up at the skyfighter that loomed only twenty feet above his head—

The enraged face of Diana appeared on another monitor. A half-eaten rat dangled from her lips. “Medea! The last person I wanted to hear from!” she said. “How dare you interrupt me during dinner?”

Medea sputtered in a frenzy.

Matt could hear Tomoko yelling against the blasting wind. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He had to concentrate. If he blew this chance . . . “I’m trying an old ninja trick!” he cried. “Only I bet it’s never been tried on a moving skyfighter before!”

It hovered overhead, not trying to soar away. Was there something wrong? Was it a trap? He couldn’t think of that now.

He aimed the crossbow, hoping that he could propel the steel-clawed suction device on the end of the bolt with enough force to make it cling to the hull of the skyfighter. And fired! He felt the bolt strike and the cord attached to it grow taut. Flinging the bow aside, he started to climb the rope. The wind whipped at him. He dangled precariously . . . would it snap? He was swaying like a pendulum now. Still the skyfighter didn’t move. There must be something wrong with its drive system, he thought.

He had almost reached the side of the craft when it began to move. His body smashed against cold metal. He reached into his equipment belt, pulled out some suction pads, fitted them on his fingers, all the while gripping a ledge in the metal with his knees. Then, making his hands into claws and applying the suction cups to the metal, he cut himself clear of the rope. There was nothing to stop him from being dashed on the road below now . . . except his fingertips.

This better work, he thought, and began to inch his way toward the hatch.

The skyfighter jerked up! Through a pane of the hatch he could see the pilot now, grimly manning the controls. They shot forward, soared, plummeted, whirled in a crazy somersault.

“You’ll never shake me loose!” Matt whispered harshly, as he tried to give into the impact of the skyfighter’s maneuvers. He was holding on by one hand now as he brought the other fist crashing down again and again on the airlock handle ... it was frozen shut! There now, there ... it was giving way a little ... it sprang open!

He held on to the door, his body trailing like a kite tail into the wind. Then, gathering up all his inner strength into a single, powerful knot of force, he cartwheeled over the open door into the skyfighter’s interior—

For one split second he was in free fall, for one split second of terror—

His feet landed hard on metal! He barked in sharp pain. The pilot was standing not six inches away from him, ready to push him out again! Using his feet as a fulcrum, he propelled his whole body forward, sending the pilot sprawling.

The pilot reached for his laser pistol. Matt kicked it out of his hand through the open airlock. He saw it spinning off into the wind. The pilot lunged at him. Matt dodged. The pilot went sailing out of the hatch. Matt didn’t look. He sat down at the controls and tried to make the craft move. Everything seemed to jam. He needed Tomoko up there with him. Tomoko had learned how to fly one of these things from Fieh Chan himself, and she’d piloted it all the way back to America from Tokyo. . . .

Damn it! The console was marked in those lizard hieroglyphics.

He banged about helplessly. At last, the skyfighter began slowly to descend, straight down, like a helicopter. That wasn’t what he’d wanted! He looked out over the desert ahead.

The patrol truck was approaching. If he didn’t do something, they’d soon be right alongside them. Although their laser operators seemed to have abominable aim, he didn’t think they’d miss at point blank range.

The skyfighter was almost skimming the ground now, parallel to the Chevy van. Evidently there was some kind of homing device that kept it within a few feet of it. He went to the hatch and shouted to CB: “Stop the van!”

CB rolled down the window and yelled, “We’ll be sitting ducks!”

“I want you and Tomoko on board this skyfighter, now!”

The van screeched to a halt. The skyfighter jerked into a holding position only a few feet above the ground. Matt lurched forward, colliding with metal. He felt warm blood gushing down his forehead, but he couldn’t stop to clean it up. One eye was flooded.

The kid and Tomoko were clambering out of the car. He held his hand out. Tomoko held the boy’s hand and clasped Matt’s. She could barely reach. With all his might he pulled. The skyfighter wobbled.

“It won’t work!” He heard Tomoko’s voice above the roaring of the wind.
“We’re going to die!”

He had to pull ... his wife, his kid, his whole world . . . God, he loved them. He had to make it. With his last ounce of strength he dragged Tomoko into the skyfighter. The boy followed. Then Matt collapsed onto the floor of the craft. As he watched Tomoko crawl over to the control console, he turned and saw through the open hatch—

The Chevy exploded! Shards of white hot metal spattered the hull of the skyfighter. And there, alongside them, was the control truck of the Visitors . . . and he was staring right into the face of one of them, a dumpy, dark-haired female with death in her eyes! “Get us out of here, Tomoko!” he gasped.

“That fool of a pilot!” Tomoko said. “There’s a loose connecting wire in the fuel computer. CB—got a piece of metal?”

“Here’s the papinium,” CB shouted, scooting over to the front and molding it into a long, thin rod with his hands.

“I hope it conducts,” she said, and plunged it into the console somewhere.

He saw the hulk of the Chevy burning as they

lifted off. “There go your sci-fi books,” he said.

“Keep still,” Tomoko said. “I’m going to take her northeast, toward the Grand Canyon.”

The wind was whistling in from the open hatch.

“Jesus, shut the door!” he moaned.

CB did so. Silence fell suddenly. Through the pane he could see the patrol truck with its laser turrets angled at the sky; he could see the lines of light issue intermittently from them.

Oh shit, he thought, *this is it, we’re gonna die, we’re gonna die*. Then he lost consciousness.

Chapter 6

As the Chevy van exploded a few feet ahead of them, Diana's face in the screen said, "Well, what is it? I don't have all night to listen to your foolishness."

Medea said, "We've destroyed their vehicle, Diana."

"Excellent!" The supreme commander's mouth twisted into a smirk. "Frankly, Medea dear, I'm surprised that you were able to pull it off. But then, this was on a much smaller scale than that abortive Florida project of yours, wasn't it? Well, when can I expect their heads? You did say I would receive their heads, didn't you? I'm so looking forward to it." She must have detected Medea's unease, for she paused and said, "You don't seem very happy, Medea, considering that you've probably just earned yourself a promotion."

"Well . . ." She thought she'd better blurt it all out at once. "They've stolen a skyfighter! They've taken off, they're somewhere to the north!" Diana's eyes narrowed into slits. Even through

the human mask her reptilian nature showed. Medea shuddered.

"You force me to take action myself, Medea. And you know how busy I am."

"Please! If you would only send me a couple of operational skyfighters, I would go after them and—"

"Operational indeed! Your own pilots couldn't fly your craft, but *they* seemed to have no trouble. Are you telling me that humans are more capable of operating Visitor devices than your own subordinates?"

"Diana—" Medea said, cringing as she thought of her future promotion being flushed away by this one error.

"Well, there's nothing for it but for me to come out myself, with two or three skyfighters," Diana said. "That should teach you a lesson."

"But—" Medea could think of nothing to say. She took another sip of her blood cocktail as she desperately tried to think of some way of getting out of this mess.

“You may expect me in less than an hour,” Diana said. “I’ll soon flush them out. It’s plain to see that this is a job for professionals, not for some weak-minded bureaucrat who weaseled her way up the ranks by poisoning and by sex! In any case, I see that your fabled wanton charms have gone to seed. You pathetic creature.”

Fulminating, Medea cut the connection with a flick of her tongue and turned to bark some anxious commands at her surviving subordinates.

“Are we safe?” CB whispered, as he sat down beside Tomoko, intent on the controls of the alien craft,

“Yes. But I don’t know how long for.” The Grand Canyon yawned ahead: the cold stars shone down, silvering the jagged edges of the plateau. The colors were muted by darkness. It was so vast, so beautiful.

“It was like this before the lizards came,” CB said, wondering. “And when we’re gone and the lizards are gone, it’ll probably still be there. It’s awesome.”

“Yes.” They had unscrewed part of the console’s chassis and rewired it to bypass the offending loose connection; the papinium sample was now safely back in CB’s pocket. Matt still dozed. She didn’t want to wake him up yet. They’d need him soon.

They soared up high above the canyon now. The morning star had risen; it was only a few hours before dawn. CB was very wise sometimes, she thought, putting an arm over his shoulder. It was true that the conflict of man and reptile had not touched this vista of breathtaking beauty at all. The canyon stretched from horizon to horizon, a winding serpent of shadow draped in night’s deeper shadow, here and there a glimmer where the starlight touched the water. Man had come into being, reached the heights of civilization, perhaps would fall to extinction under the savage rule of the Visitors. And this place had seen it all.

“CB,” she said softly.

But the boy had fallen asleep on her shoulder. She was alone, then, with her thoughts. Smoothly, the skyfighter sliced the air, its motion barely perceptible.

She thought of the people she’d cared for, whom she’d lost because of this terrible war. Anne Williams, Matt’s bold secretary, who had died fighting the

lizards. Professor Schwabauer—was he really still alive? And Fieh Chan, whom she had thought to be evil once, who turned out to be Kenzo Sugihara, the alien swordmaster; who had died so that her love for Matt might be renewed. She missed him, wanted him beside her now. They were alike, she and the alien who had fought on the humans' side. They were both creatures of two worlds: she of east and west, he of the stars and the Earth. They were different . . . rejected by both their worlds, confusedly trying to find their own pathways through the labyrinth of their existence. ***He was the only one who understood me***, she thought. ***Even though I love Matt, and we've been through so much together ... the only creature who really could see into my heart was a reptile from another planet.***

But he was dead.

Yet Tomoko hoped, she hoped . . .

Her reverie came to an abrupt end when she saw three stars drifting across the sky. ***Stars don't move that fast!*** she thought. ***They must be—***

"Wake up!" She prodded CB and told him to go and wake Matt. "We've got company."

"What'll we do?" CB said. He looked up at the horizon and saw them too. "Total gross-o-rama! Must be half the lizard fleet!"

"Oh, Matt, Matt, wake up!" she said, panicking.

"Wake up, Matt . . . please wake up . . . CB pleaded, shaking him.

"Wha—" said Matt, sitting up abruptly.

"Lizard skyfighters!" said CB. "And I think they're coming after us."

"Uh oh," Matt said. "I hope your video arcade wrist is in good shape!"

"Never better, Matt," said the boy. "I turned 'Galaga' over ***fifteen times*** the day before we left." "Quick then. Strap yourself into one of the laser consoles and set your sights. I'll take the other one and—"

"Oh, no! Only one of them is working!" CB said. "Considering how we had to

juryrig the steering console,” Tomoko said, “I’m not surprised.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make do,” said Matt. “You want to shoot, CB? Or do you want me to?” “Are you kidding, Matt? Like, you know you suck at video games.”

Matt sighed and joined Tomoko in the co-pilot’s seat of the skyfighter.

“Medea dear, stop fidgeting and steer the skyfighter,” Diana said irritably. “I want to get this over with as soon as possible so I can go back to controlling the riots.”

Nervously, Medea manipulated the controls of Diana’s sleek, late-model skyfighter. Only ten minutes had passed since the supreme commander, sulky and irritable, had arrived to pick her up. “I’m getting a signal now,” she said as she monitored the video screens for a sign of the hijacked skyfighter. “Well, after them!” Diana said. “There are three of us and only one of them. What on earth are you worried about?”

“Of course I’m not worried, Diana,” Medea said.

To be honest, she was far more concerned about the proximity of her capricious commander than about the possibility of their being unable to shoot down the resistance fighters. She could wager that the sole reason Diana had decided to come out herself, rather than send a lackey for this trifling mission, was to keep an eye on her—to make sure that she didn’t slip up again. She couldn’t concentrate on the steering console, and the skyfighter began to list to starboard. Diana fell out of her seat; when the craft had righted itself, and Diana was seated again, Medea could tell that her commander was not pleased.

It was not for nothing that Diana had taken for her human name the name of an ancient Earth goddess—the goddess of the hunt! Yes, Diana was a huntress. But whom was she hunting? A few insignificant members of the resistance, or Medea herself, her erstwhile favorite? Medea could not help thinking that her commander had some hideous fate in store for her. When the thrill of the hunt was over, Diana seldom had any use for her victims; she would discard them like so much trash. Though Medea was proud of her own warlike nature, she had to admit that Diana’s ruthlessness was in a class of its own.

The enemy came into sight.

“There they are,” Diana said, “flying over that canyon. What a hideous natural formation! When we complete our conquest, I’ll have it levelled, and we can build an enormous food-processing complex over it.”

Never shifting from their perfect V-formation, the three skyfighters turned in the direction of their prey and swooped down towards the canyon.

A whimper of pleasure escaped Diana’s lips. “You seem pleased,” Medea said, “though we haven’t caught them yet.”

“The joy is in the chase,” Diana said, closing her eyes. A vein throbbed in her artificial cheek. ***How lifelike these disguises are***, Medea thought. ***They can portray every nuance of emotion. And Diana's deadly beauty still radiates, even through that fur-topped skin and those simian features.***

Chapter 7

“They’re splitting up!” CB shouted. “I can’t get a fix on all three at once. There’s just one of me.”

Two of the alien craft were zooming toward them. A third remained high up. “That top one isn’t attacking. Must be one of their precious leaders. The others are just cannon fodder,” Matt said. “Tomoko, swerve—oh God, swerve!”

He held on tight as the skyfighter nosed up and rocketed toward the morning star. Lines of laser fire crisscrossed the darkness. “I can’t see, I can’t see!” Tomoko screamed.

Matt clawed his way back to the control console. “I’ll steer, you drive,” he said.

“I’m gonna fire . . . I’m gonna fire . . . missed!” CB cried. A blue lightline shot out from their skyfighter, strained toward the enemy . . . petered out. “These lasers need recharging. They’ll never function unless we get real close.”

“They’re coming in,” Matt said. “Evasive action!” Wildly, he manipulated the controls. The

skyfighter responded sluggishly.

“There’s only one thing to do,” Tomoko said. “Dive.”

“Into the canyon?” Matt said.

“That’s what I said.”

“We’ll get creamed,” CB said.

“Maybe. But, Matt, but . . . those guys are flying top-of-the-line skyfighters. I can tell by their markings. I’ll bet that one that’s up there, watching the fray, is Diana herself! You know what that means? With their souped-up drives, those skyfighters’ll accelerate to multi-Mach in fractions of a second—faster than the reaction time of any human or lizard! They’re designed for high-speed chases in the upper atmosphere, not for threading precariously through a canyon. They’ll never be able to react in time to brake and—”

Matt swallowed in disbelief. But they were already descending so rapidly that he felt like throwing up all over the console.

Only a few hours until daybreak. Already the sides of the great gulf were striated with fingers of crimson, rose, gray. A mist rose from the valley. Still they fell. “I’m well within the canyon now,” Tomoko said, “Now skim the edges, swaying from side to side.” Matt did as she suggested, forcing the skyfighter’s trajectory into an irregular spiral that just missed crashing into the rocks.

A skyfighter was stealing up behind them— “Shoot, CB!”

“You bet!”

Fire met fire across the dark-hued crags. “It’s gaining on us!” CB shouted.

“Hold your fire till you’re sure it’s within range,” said Matt. He watched the kid, stern-faced, his eyes intent on the enemy, this kid who should have been sitting in a schoolroom, not fighting for his life against lizard oppressors. How could Matt have foreseen, when he took in this young boy whose parents had been cruelly murdered, eaten alive by the Visitors, that he would be bringing him into even more danger? They had to reach the free states somehow, alive ... he owed it to the kid. A normal life. He had a right to it.

The skyfighter was riding their tail now. “Here goes nothing!” the boy said, and squeezed the control.

For a single instant it seemed that they were doomed, for the enemy kept coming. Then came the roar of an explosion, the shriek of shredding metal, the pelting hail of shards on their skyfighter’s flanks. “You got the bastard,” he breathed.

“No time. Here comes another one,” CB said.

“He’s really gunning it,” said Matt. “Tomoko, do we have more drive power?”

“No ... no, I think we’re losing acceleration. This old thing just isn’t meant to take such punishment.”

“Okay. Bring her down even lower. Until we’re almost touching the canyon floor. I have an idea. Remember what you said about the responses of the super

skyfighters, how the lizard reflexes would be no match for the hardware?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s lure them down.”

“Sure.”

“CB, when we get them skimming the bottom, chasing us—”

“They’re there now!” he shrieked excitedly. “They’re aiming!”

“Quick! Shoot randomly at the surrounding crags . . . start a landslide!”

CB fired madly. Rocks flew. A huge chunk of the canyon wall started to wobble and then topple. The crash reverberated through the canyon. Looking aft, Matt saw that the lizards had shot skyward to avoid the shooting rocks. The lizard skyfighter was leapfrogging now. “I think we’re starting to panic them,” he said.

“Look! A bend in the river. Matt, dodge!” Tomoko yelled.

“Full speed!” said Matt. “I’ve got it under control.”

A huge black wall loomed up, stretching as far up as the eye could see. The enemy vessel was less than a hundred feet behind and closing, closing—

Matt veered up, yanking the control levers with all his force! Beneath them, the other skyfighter smashed full tilt into the wall of the canyon. It seemed as though a beast of fire were devouring the very mountain. Another roar echoed endlessly. He could hardly hear himself think. *Ascend, ascend*, he thought, pulling the controls hard.

“There’s one left,” CB said. “The one that’s been hovering above us the whole time, not diving down to attack.”

Matt saw it now, silhouetted in the sunrise.

Gliding back and forth. Waiting. Waiting.

“What are we gonna do now?” he said.

“Lasers are out,” CB said.

“Drive power’s low,” said Tomoko.

CB came forward to the pilots’ area and squatted between the two seats. “Wanna make a run for it?” he said.

“Dunno,” said Matt.

“Parachutes?” said Tomoko, reminding him of how they had been forced to land over Tokyo in their last adventure.

“Yeah. Maybe. I guess.” Matt didn’t want to confess that he was beginning to feel a terrible despair. How stupid of them to think they could ever make it to the free zone alive. How many miles were left? Two or three thousand? Their van was gone. This skyfighter didn’t have much juice left in her. And an enemy craft was stalking them, ready to pluck them from the air; and even if they eluded it there’d be another and another and another . . .

“I don’t know what to do!” he said at last. “It seems that the number of human beings on this earth is dwindling, dwindling—and there’s an endless supply of lizards up there in space, wave after wave after wave. Now I know how the Indians felt when the cavalry started coming down the hill.”

“Matt,” Tomoko said, and she and the boy squeezed his hand gently.

If only he had the guts to cry. But he hid his feelings deep inside himself as he turned the skyfighter toward the one remaining alien craft.

“Shall I give chase?” Medea said, eyeing the battered skyfighter that had emerged from the rim of the canyon. She was not entirely thrilled at the prospect. Not after seeing the other two skyfighters dashed against the rocks, smashed, unsalvageable.

Diana watched the skyfighter as it neared them. “They’re madmen—madmen, those humans! They would have killed themselves, just to take us along with them. That half-Japanese one, Tomoko Jones; I daresay she’s not above a kamikaze attack on us.” She said no more, but set her mouth into a frown, waiting for Medea to make the next suggestion. It was a game, Medea saw. If Medea opted to attack, Diana could blame her for foolhardiness; if she advised

caution, Diana would criticize her cowardice. It was a familiar pattern. That was how Diana dealt with others. She must never, never appear in the wrong—or she'd lash out in a rage, and more than likely ruin the political career of whatever subordinate had inspired her wrath.

What a quandary, Medea thought. But she still had one more trick up her sleeve, one she'd occasionally used before to good effect.

“Diana, dear,” she said, in a passable parody of a seductive voice, “we can catch them any time, can't we? I mean, they're only humans. I swear to you, I'll get them for you. We'll have a banquet, just the two of us, and eat their little hearts out! But meanwhile ... I haven't, you know, *seen* you in so long . .

“Don't you Diana dear me,” Diana snapped. “You're right, I don't have time to chase after a few sorry specimens. I've got to get back to Los Angeles. Hunting is all very well, but ! *am* a planetary commander with serious duties.”

“Perhaps a moment or two of. . . recreation?” Medea said, ripping off her human mask to reveal her slime-glistening scales, her crimson-slitty eyes, the delicate wattles of her neck. “Oh, Diana, I've been so starved for . . . attention, here.”

She reached out to caress the rubbery texture of Diana's artificial face. Beneath it she could feel the outlines of scales, the contours of reptilian muscles . . . beneath the cheeks the sinuous movement of her tongue. “You fat, incompetent harridan,” Diana hissed, her voice growing more and more metallic. But in spite of herself she was becoming aroused. What a relief, Medea thought, that Diana had never been too choosy about the objects of her lust.

“I swear to you I'll catch them,” Medea whispered in the croaking, rasping tones that passed for eroticism among her kind. “I'll chase them all the way to the eastern mountains and beyond. I'll chase them into the no-man's land . . . I'll even chase them into the free zone if I have to!”

“The red dust will get you,” Diana said. “No great loss!”

“I'll send in the experimental papinium tanks whose production our colleague Dingwall is overseeing on the East Coast.”

“How do you know about them? That's classified information, unavailable to an underling like you.” “! wasn't always an outpost commander, Diana.

Remember? You demoted me!” Her wattles quivered now, their hue deepening in response to unspoken desire. She could smell the heady pheromones her glands were releasing into the close, confined air of the skyfighter. “Must we always be strangers, Diana? We were equals once . . . partners . . . lovers.”

A piercing animal shriek of lust escaped Diana’s pretty pink human pseudothroat. Good, then, Medea thought. She’d won a reprieve.

“I do need a little something to relax me,” Diana said, her tongue curling in and put of her mouth like a serpent swaying to the flute of a snakecharmer. “But I warn you ... if you fail, this time . . .”

“I’ll accept the consequences: oh, Diana . . . Diana ... oh, how your scales glisten . . . how your eyes shine in the alien sunlight!”

“How peculiar,” Tomoko was saying, “they’re making no move to attack.”

“Maybe they’ve got fifty more of the goddamn skyfighters hidden behind the mountain somewhere,” Matt said bitterly.

“I don’t think so. Look, they’re turning around. They’re veering west, away from us.”

“We scared ’em off!” CB said triumphantly. “We kicked ass!”

“I don’t think we should be that confident,” said Matt, watching the craft, hawklike, gleaming, vanish over the mountains. “They’ve probably gone back for reinforcements. We’d better haul it out of here.”

“Where to?” CB said.

“Freedom!” Matt said softly.

“Think we can make it?” Tomoko said.

“We have to!” Matt said urgently.

“Not in this wornout old thing, we won’t,”

Tomoko said. “Another battle scene like that, and everything’s going to give out:

the steering, the drive, the lasers, *everything*. ”

“We’ve already lost our lasers,” CB said.

“How long have we got?” Matt said, watching nervously as Tomoko read the gauges. “Can we make it at least as far east as the Carolinas, maybe hit the no-man’s land, where we’d at least have a chance?”

“I don’t know!” Tomoko said, anguished.

They turned the craft toward the rising sun. The crimson glow pervaded the cramped control chamber, flooding them with its warmth. Sunrise, renewal: it was a corny symbol, but they *had* survived the first twenty-four hours of their escape attempt.

“Jesus, I want to get out of this alien uniform,” CB said, twisting the papinium sample in his hands into a delicate corkscrew shape.

“It’ll be soon now, kid,” Matt said. “Soon. I promise.”

He didn’t know how soon it would be, or whether they’d make it at all. But he had to keep hope alive. For the kid’s sake.

The clouds: grim, foreboding, stained with red. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. He steered the fighter skyward. They breached a stratum of purple-gray clouds and emerged into a cold, golden sunlight high above the desolate beauty of the desert.

Chapter 8

After her tawdry tete-a-tete with the supreme commander, Medea was not disposed to be charitable. Returning to her office at the Phoenix Hilton, she ensconced herself in her divan by the window overlooking the sundeck, and began to eat heavily. *Not even one miserable skyfighter*, she reflected. *The least she could have done was allow me to keep the one I flew back on! But no. She abandoned me to my own devices. How does she expect me to catch them? By the supreme saurian, they could be a thousand miles away by now.*

She cast no more than a momentary glance at what the chef had produced for her breakfast. Ah, how touching. The hamster canapes. Her favorite. Those succulent morsels were still wriggling, trying to disengage themselves from their pastry confinement . . . how cunning! How did they ever manage to bake the shells without killing the hamsters? *It just goes to show*, she thought, *how creative a properly converted human can be in the service of their masters.* She couldn't wait to sample one of those furry, palpitating warm-blooded little ro-

dents; picking one up delicately by its tail, she swallowed it in one gulp. Ah, that delicious rush of warmth as it squeezed its life juices into her gullet! There was nothing in the galaxy as invigorating as a live mammal. Despite the stupefying obstinacy of its inhabitants, this planet did have its uses after all.

Oh, to be warm-blooded like these creatures . . . to be constantly cocooned in a comforting heat-haze . . . not to have to seek out the sun, not to have to grow lethargic at the onset of the cold. How strange it must be. Her nerves tingled all over from the sense of well-being that the hamster's violent death had induced in her. Another! she thought, automatically reaching for the platter of goodies.

But no.

There was business to be done, if she was ever to climb back into Diana's good graces. Clearly, just submitting to her deviant desires wasn't enough; and even Medea had to admit to herself that her body was not what it used to be. Her scales were matted and lusterless, and her gluttony had made it harder and harder to squeeze into her human skin every morning.

She had to face the harsh truth about herself. She had failed with the Florida

project; she had failed even with this childishly simple task of capturing three aliens—one of them a child, no less. For some moments Medea luxuriated in self-pity. But self-pity was a poor substitute for power, so she reached for the controls of her telecommunications console and started to call people.

“I want the entire jurisdiction mobilized, do you hear?” she commanded the overworked officer whose harried face appeared in the screen. “Get on with it! You irk me.”

“Yes, Medea. Of course, Medea.” Why did she get the impression that he wasn’t taking her seriously? What rumors had Diana’s arrival planted in the local staff? Were they perhaps already planning a coup, those blasted subordinates? Sometimes she wished she were a member of a cowardly race like the humans instead of the fiercest, most warlike species in the galaxy.

Her mind seething with Machiavellian intrigues, she punched a secret number on the console.

Electronic impulses darted from satellite to satellite and were routed through the switchboards of half a dozen Mother Ships before her call could be put through.

When it was, the face of a young black man wearing a tuxedo appeared in the screen. He sported a crimson bowtie and cummerbund, and clutched a long conductor’s baton in one hand. From somewhere in the background came the excruciating sounds that passed for music among these lower beings. She winced.

“How you can like such obscene noises is beyond me, Dingwall,” she said.

“Well, it’s all part of the persona,” Dingwall said gruffly. “You’ve never heard of ‘method’ acting, have you? It’s a technique these humans use in one of their art forms known as the theater, where they pretend to be other people. I’ve been taking a leaf from their book, and so far no one has penetrated my disguise. But what are you doing calling me . . . and on my secret access code, no less? I’m in rehearsal. It’s Mozart’s G minor symphony. Very interesting, in a primitive sort of way—” .

“Must you lecture me about alien art forms every time I call you?” Medea said irritably.

“Now look here. There’s absolutely no one to talk to here except these humans. The Washington, D.C., area happens not to be under our occupation, remember? We’re not even supposed to be here. I’m having a hard time blending in, and I’m not making that much headway as a spy.”

“It’s your fault for trying to assume a persona in alien arts,” Medea snapped.

Dingwall sighed. “I thought it would be easier,” he said. “Their artists are so eccentric, I figured that if I did anything reptilian by mistake they’d just interpret it as an artistic foible. And in a way I enjoy being conductor of the McLean Youth Orchestra.” He looked around and whispered conspiratorially, “The young ones are the tastiest!” “You haven’t been—”

“I’ve been discreet, I assure you! But it is so hard to resist sometimes. Well, is this just a social call, or am I to understand that Medea is once again in trouble with the powers that be?”

Medea flinched at how well he knew her. It should not have surprised her; once, back on the home planet, they had been very close. They had even considered getting married and raising a brood of hatchlings. But then the opportunity to colonize this barbarian world had come up, and neither of them had been able to resist the challenge.

“Well?” Dingwall said, and made to turn off his communicator.

“Wait! There *is* trouble. And I think it’s coming your way. How are the plans for the papinium project coming?”

“Prototype papinium-coated tanks, capable of penetrating into red dust-infested areas without injury to the operators, are even now being tested in North Carolina,” Dingwall said. “Why this sudden interest? I’d rather tell you about the new Loukas Stourmwitch symphony.”

“And who is Loukas Stourmwitch?” she asked, knowing full well that she’d have to endure more of this artistic chatter before he would be willing to discuss her pressing problem. “One of your precious human primitive artists?”

“Good heavens no. Why, what a philistine you are, Medea! Stourmwitch”—he gave it the proper reptilian pronunciation now, beginning with a savage hiss and ending with a tongue-flick and a sharp intake of breath—“happens to be a very

great musician from our own home planet. And it just happens that I will be playing his new work, the ‘Galactic Symphony,’ in a special arrangement for these cacophonous ‘musical’ instruments of theirs, with the McLean Youth Orchestra, at a special gala to celebrate intergalactic brotherhood.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about your ridiculous hobbies! I just want to tell you that three key members of the resistance are escaping towards

Washington in a stolen skyfighter . . . and they *may* be carrying the lump of papinium that Donovan and Parrish stole from the Los Angeles command center last week.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so sooner? It all ties in with this Loukas Stourmwitch concert—”

“All right, all right! I still outrank you, Dingwall, if only barely. I want the papinium tanks put on alert! Today! I want to be able to give chase all the way through the no-man’s Sand ... up to the free zone if necessary!”

“Those three must be pretty important to you,” Dingwall said. “Don’t tell me you have some deal going with Diana. Well, don’t expect any help unless you cut me in, Medea. I don’t want to be stuck here forever. It’s lonely to be a spy in alien territory. I want a more cushy job . . . like yours, maybe.”

“Yes, yes, something will be arranged.”

“But I don’t want to jeopardize my own little plan, Medea. About the Stourmwitch concert. I have my own little project going, one that might return a large region of this planet into our hands.” “Just by playing a piece of music? That’s preposterous.”

“Well, as one of their playwrights once said, ‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast.’” “More of that primitive nonsense. I don’t see what you see in it. I’d no more listen to human poetry than I’d listen to the squeals of this hamster,” she said, popping one into her mouth. “It’s all food,” she said with her mouth full. “Nothing more than food.”

“But you don’t understand the beauty of it. This planet has food that can sing and dance; you can even have sex with it! The human being is the perfect biological product: it entertains, it serves as slave labor, and it’s one of the most

nutritious creatures in the galaxy.”

“There, my dear,” Medea said thoughtfully, “is where we understand one another completely.”

PART 2

FLIGHT THROUGH NO-MAN'S LAND

Chapter 9

As he cleaned his rifle, Raymond Paul Smith whistled to himself. A hare turned slowly on a spit, its mouth-watering scent mingling with the cool fragrance of an Appalachian morning. His companion, who wore the guise of a young human male, smiled at him.

“Want some of this hare, boy?” Ray said, slicing off a haunch with his knife.

“No thanks. You see, I’m a veterinarian.”

“Well, just because you look after them don’t mean you can’t eat ’em,” Ray said, taking a hefty bite. —

“No, I mean . . . did I say something wrong?” The young man smiled again, floundering around for the right word. “I mean to say, I’m a vegetable . . . no, a vegetinarian . . .”

“Oh, a vegetarian? You’re a mighty queer lizard. *If* you’re a lizard. We passed through a dust zone back there and you didn’t even cough.”

“Dr. Brunk, back in New England, he gave me an antidote. It’s supposed to last me until I get to California. I got on the bus for Hollywood. No one

told me there was one in Florida as well as in California. I didn’t find out until I reached Raleigh.”

“Can’t rightly say I believe you,” Ray said. “What’s your name?”

“I am called Willie.”

“Mighty weird name for a lizard. Well, Willie, there’s no war going on here in North Carolina. This is no-man’s land here. Lizards stay south, humans stay north. Here, we live as we please.”

“That’s not true,” Willie said with surprising vehemence. “I’ve seen terrible things here. Evidence of secret installations. I don’t know what’s going on, but I think they’re planning something. Please . . . you must help. Or you may lose your freedom.”

Ray thought about this for a moment as he ate. Here in the wilds of North Carolina there was no obvious evidence of the lizard occupation. He'd seen it all on television, of course. But he'd never seen a lizard up close before, until Willie had approached him, obviously distraught. Ray thought he was a pretty good judge of character, though, and even though this fellow couldn't speak proper English there was something convincing about him.

"What can I do?" he said at last.

"Help me locate someone in the resistance," Willie said.

"You ain't asking much!" Ray said. "Around here, we keep pretty much to ourselves. I tell you what, though. Stick around in the village for a few days. Who knows, maybe something'll turn up."

"I think it just did!" Willie said, pointing up at the sky.

"Shi-i-it!" Ray said, looking up.

What was that flaming metal object hurtling through the air like a comet? What were those red dots dropping from the sky? "Parachutes," he shouted. "Lizard parachutes!"

The ball of fire and metal slammed into the mountainside up ahead.

"Let's go look," said Ray.

"I fear the worst," Willie said anxiously. The two of them scrambled downhill through the lush woods.

"There . . . smoke, maybe a forest fire," Ray said. A blast of heat hit him in the face. He kept his rifle pointed straight ahead. "Lizard scum! Oh, sorry."

"Don't worry," Willie puffed, "I couldn't agree with you more."

Up ahead, three figures were struggling to free themselves of some bushes. They were wearing Visitor uniforms.

"I'll be damned," Ray said. "Guess you're right, them lizards are trying to take over the mountain. Well, those three aren't gonna make it past me."

He fired a warning shot. The echo bounded and rebounded across the mountains.

“Wait a minute,” Willie said, “one of them’s only a kid.”

“And one of them’s Chineese,” Ray said. “But they’re still lizards underneath. They ain’t gonna take over *my* village.”

He aimed his rifle—

“No!” The kid’s voice carried on the wind. “Don’t shoot . . . like, we’re human, we’re human!”

Ray gaped as the three staggered toward them. They were bruised; the man’s face was bloody from a cut over one eye. The oriental woman seemed to be limping. The boy’s hair stood on end, and he had a shiny blue ornament in his ear. They were the oddest assortment of people he’d ever seen.

They approached now. “Thank God,” the man said. “I’m Matt. This is Tomoko. And CB. We’re from Los Angeles. Where are we?”

“That has got to be the most unlikely story I ever heard,” Ray said slowly. “First one of them lizard skyfighters crashes into the mountain”—it was still burning in the distance, filling his nostrils with an acrid, searing odor—“then you guys hop out and tell me you’re from Los Angeles, and you’re wearing lizard uniforms and insisting you ain’t lizards. And then this here Willie says he *is* a lizard but he’s really on our side and he’s not wearing one of them uniforms—”

“Willie!” Tomoko cried out. The self-styled alien’s jaw dropped. They obviously recognized each other. It was a coincidence beyond belief.

“Tomoko! Matt!” Willie shouted, and ran to embrace them. “This is amazing. I was just asking this man to direct me to someone in the resistance, when—”

“We’re not in the resistance anymore,” Matt said. “We’re just trying to get to freedom.”

“It’s terrible,” Tomoko said, “the riots in L.A., the death of Nathan Bates—”

“He’s dead?” Willie said. “There must have been a blackout, I never heard about it.”

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?” Ray said in exasperation.

The three newcomers turned to him. The woman said, “Please help us, sir; we have to find a way to the free zone, and we don’t even know where we are.”

“You ain’t reached freedom yet, ma’am,” Ray said. “It’s to the north. This is North Carolina. The no-man’s land. But this side of the mountain is pretty much red-dusted. We ain’t seen an alien in months here. Except this fellow.”

“He’s a fifth-columnist,” Matt said. “He’s probably on antitoxin.”

“But I’m running low. I need to get south, where the dust isn’t active.”

“And we need to get north,” Tomoko said. “Please,” Willie said, “I have to talk to you. Something truly awful is happening here . . . secret installations . . .”

“We don’t have time for that,” Matt said. “We’ve paid our dues. I want the kid to have a normal childhood. What’s left of it.”

Ray looked at the boy, who seemed anything but normal. “What’s that thing in your ear?” he said at last.

“Oh, an ear cuff,” CB said. He pulled it off. It was a some kind of blue-gray metal.

When Willie caught sight of it, he groaned. “Papinium,” he whispered. “I should have guessed. I didn’t know they were already producing it. Oh, this is terrible, terrible. That explains everything!”

“What are you talking about?” Matt said.

“There’s not going to be a free zone if you don’t help me,” Willie said desperately.

This was all too much for Ray. “Come back to the campfire,” he said. “Before I hear any more of this sci-fi stuff, I better pour me a stiff drink.”

“I think I’d better have one too,” Matt said.

“Me too,” said Tomoko.

Ray raised an eyebrow.

“Me too,” said the kid.

“You’re too young,” Matt said.

“Considering what you’ve all probably been through,” Ray said, “I think we should all get drunk. Including the kid.”

Chapter 10

When Dingwall put away his wristwatch-sized communicator screen and returned to the auditorium to continue the rehearsal, he was barely able to concentrate on the barbarities of the Terran music he was conducting. Normally, he found its crude, jerky mood shifts and incomprehensible rhythmic patterns charmingly quaint, though it was sometimes hard to suppress a derisive smirk or two at the more outlandish harmonies. But at the moment he had no patience at all. For one thing, he had to finish the rehearsal as quickly as possible and return home for another dose of the stolen antitoxin; already his immunity was slipping and the omnipresent red dust was beginning to make him queasy. He could last it out another hour or two at the most.

He tapped the baton on his podium. "Very well, children," he said. "Enough of this Mozart. Will you get out the Stourmwitch score now, please." "Yech!" said one of the violinists. It was one of the Van Pischke boys. "Not this weird avant-garde stuff again."

"Just because it was written by an alien," Dingwall said huffily, "doesn't mean it's bad. We're all going to have to get used to alien cultural artifacts, you know, i think you'll find there's a certain beauty in it." ***One more crack out of you, 'he thought, and I'll roast you over a hibachi and have you for lunch! Oh, if only I didn't have to be so discreet!*** "All right. Bar 102," he said, giving a ponderous downbeat.

That was more like real music! The strings wailed in a passable imitation of the ***stranjoops*** of the homeworld, and, by the clever expedient of having the players loosen their violin bows and coat the strings with vaseline, he had contrived to recreate with chilling precision the timbre of a ***gallindor***, a sound not unlike the mating yowl of one of those mammals . . . what did they call it? A cat. The music filled him with nostalgia for the homeworld, and for a moment he was at peace. If only he'd known how desolate it would be to live among these aliens, constantly listening to their inane jabberings, unable to satisfy his appetite for human flesh except on rare and furtive outings into the slums of the city! It irked him no end that the Visitors' conquest of the planet was incomplete, that there remained outposts, like these free states, where humans actually looked down on reptiles and refused to kowtow.

Thank goodness these humans were so gullible, Dingwall thought. Despite the frustrations of being stranded among these apelike aliens, he had made many important contacts in the “free” world. He preferred to think of it as the as-yet-unconquered world, for these humans were such fools —disciplineless dreamers—that it was astonishing that they’d been able to climb this far up the ladder of civilization. Indeed, they had barely made it this far; they’d almost wiped themselves out a couple of times in this one century alone. Ah, it had been interesting studying their history; it was one of the bloodier ones he’d ever encountered, rivaling even the Visitors’ own; it was far more entertaining than their wishy-washy, charmless art.

He waved his arms impetuously, loving the wildness of Stourmwitch’s vision even filtered through these bizarre musical instruments. The very incompetence of these youths added to the effect, for did not Stourmwitch intend, in this Galactic Symphony, to depict the chaos of creation, the searing brilliance of the quasars, the desolation of black holes, the vastness of space itself. . . that very space Dingwall had traversed in awe and terror, only to find himself on a planet full of loathsome talking apes? Why, this was hell itself, Dingwall thought. He did not believe in the ancient myth of the beautiful garden and the pure reptiles who fell from grace at the blandishments of a temptress ape. He felt no attraction for these creatures!

Only, now and then, hunger.

They were warm-blooded!

Keep a straight face, he told himself, it would not do to start salivating in the middle of the rehearsal, though the sight of thirty-five potential platters of succulent young meat was enough to drive any self-respecting reptile mad with gluttony.

He continued to conduct. He wasn’t sure how he managed to make it through the rehearsal . . . after Medea’s startling revelations, and knowing full well what political maneuverings were in store for him tonight, at the Romanian ambassador’s residence, when he would have to lay more groundwork for his secret plan.

Confound that Medea! Had she blabbed to Diana? he thought. Surely not—she was too stupid to be that treacherous. Or wasn’t she?

The rehearsal finally dragged to a close. Parents thronged the vestibule of the Alden Theater, waiting to pick up their charges. Dingwall could hardly wait to leave.

He climbed into the Porsche bequeathed to him —unintentionally—by a rich banker whom he had converted and then devoured, and drove to his townhouse in downtown Alexandria, a quaint little Virginia suburb of Washington. The house was the unwitting gift of another convert.

He parked in a side alley. It was night. Two teenagers were breakdancing by the side door of the house.

He shooed them out of the way and went inside.

Threw off his tuxedo, which he constantly wore outside in order to shore up his image of eccentricity, but which he secretly loathed; tossed his crimson cummerbund on the counter. And finally, after a cursory look around to make sure no spies had penetrated, he carefully peeled off his human mask, feeling a great sense of relief that he no longer had to imitate those creatures he despised so much, and threw it down on the sofa. ***The antitoxin***, he thought, and hastened to the refrigerator where his supply was kept. ***Only a few ampoules left... a month's supply at most. I must finish my task before then. . . .***

Dingwall went down to the basement of his townhouse, carefully double-bolting the door behind him. Only here, in this secret chamber, might one be able to tell that this was no normal house. For Dingwall had transformed it into a dungeon. Here was a conversion chamber, unoccupied right now, it would soon contain some victim. Here were communication devices and monitors with which Dingwall could communicate with the outside world—the ***real*** world of the reptiles, not this primitive society of apes. It was at one of these consoles that Dingwall seated himself. A screen lit up. "I must speak with Diana," Dingwall whispered in his metal-tinged, grating voice.

"She's extremely busy," said the Mother Ship official who answered. "Oh, it's you. I'll try to put you through, but what with the riots—"

"I'll wait." He tapped his fingers and flicked down a passing cockroach with his tongue.

"Ah, Dingwall," Diana purred.

“Still beautiful,” he said, “despite your disguise.”

“Spare me the flattery. I know you never make social calls. What’s the matter?”

“I’ve heard from ... a mutual friend,” Dingwall said, “who tells me that some other mutual friends of ours are headed this way . . . and that they have cottoned on to at least part of our mutual secret.” “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I’m being rather cloak-and-dagger about it, but wouldn’t you rather have my discretion than Medea’s big mouth?” Dingwall said smoothly. “I want you to know that you will have my complete cooperation. Medea has no idea of the gravity of my secret mission, nor does she know that I am in almost daily communication with you; the poor thing has lost her sense of perspective entirely, I’m afraid, since you were regrettably compelled to, ah . . . regress her rank somewhat. She knows something about the papinium installations. Why, she actually ordered me to bring out the papinium tanks to chase your renegade resistance fighters!” “Why not?” Diana said. “Nothing else has worked. I’m not one to use a nuclear device on a gnat, but ... it might be useful to see whether they really work.”

“But if they don’t—many of us will die,” Dingwall said.

“When has that ever deterred you before?”

“Ah. Your ruthlessness puts even mine to shame,” Dingwall said, smiling.

For of course Diana had given him tacit approval for precisely what he wanted to do—while at the same time allowing him the avenue of blaming the whole thing on Medea, if it should prove a fiasco.

Medea wanted power, obviously. But she’d never been a shrewd manipulator. When the showdown came, Dingwall thought to himself with a self-satisfied smirk, it would be **he** who would rise to power within the Visitor hierarchy, not Medea. She would never learn, would she?

Gingerly, Dingwall lifted a trap door in the floor of his conversion chamber. This part of the house was the most secret of all. A long shaft descended into the very bowels of Alexandria. Dingwall climbed down the musty iron stairwell.

Presently he came to a tunnel, about as wide as a man or Visitor. To the right was an entry to his private suspension chambers, where he kept his dinners, as it

were, on the hoof. Further still the tunnel widened; yet further was a rack of hoverdisks. Dingwall climbed onto one and subvocalized a command for it to take him to the command center of the papinium project. The disk rose and began to thread its way down the labyrinth. . . .

The labyrinth whose walls were coated with a molecular film of blue metal, the labyrinth from which, at a moment that he alone had the power to determine, would come a new invasion that would crush these presumptuous “free states” once and for all!

Chapter 11

“So where are all these secret installations you’ve been telling me about?” Matt said to Willie when they reached the small lean-to where Ray lived. CB, who had never really been outside a large city until the day they began their flight to freedom, was staring shamelessly at everything he saw. Ray, who had never seen a Japanese-American, was doing the same with Tomoko. The setting was so idyllic, Matt thought, it was like something out of *The Waltons*. It was hard to remember the terror in Tokyo, the panic in Los Angeles, or even the hair-raising dogfight and narrow escape they had all been through in Arizona less than a day before. Running into Willie, whom Matt knew vaguely as a member of Donovan’s inner circle, was extraordinary too, although he’d been vaguely aware that Willie was supposed to be engaged in some top-secret project somewhere in New England, helping out with their local resistance.

Willie said, “I will show them to you. Please. Then you will know.”

“I can’t believe,” Tomoko said, “that we’ve been through all this . . . and we still can’t find peace! I envy Kenzo Sugihara, even though he died . . . because he died at peace with himself. If that’s the only way we’ll ever escape this terrible conquest, if that’s the only way out . . . what would you do, Willie?”

“I can offer one thing,” Willie said softly. Matt saw that he had the same serenity that the alien swordmaster had possessed; and he felt a terrible yearning for the same inner tranquility. “There is a ceremony we have, we of the *preta-na-ma* brotherhood. We call it the ritual of Zon. Do you want to participate?”

“Wow! Weird lizard voodoo rites! Totally awesome!” said CB.

“What exactly does it consist of?” said Matt.

“We must be very still. Let us hold paws, if you think it will help,” Willie said.

“You sure talk funny,” said Ray, “but I’ll try anything once.”

“All right then.”

All of them squatted on the floor and linked hands. It was a strange scene; the

five of them, from different backgrounds, not to mention planets, together on the bare wooden floor of a hut in the Appalachian Mountains. After a long meditative silence, Willie began to chant in a high-pitched, singsongy voice. During Matt's long apprenticeship, his martial arts master had sometimes gone off into these strange trances, but this was the first time that Matt had ever experienced such a communal merging of identities and emotions.

A profound sense of well-being washed over him. He could feel so much that had been hidden to him. He clutched Tomoko's palm and felt not only her love for him but her secret yearning for that other one, the one who had died for them, the alien swordmaster . . . and her concealed longing for his return. But somehow he wasn't jealous anymore. It seemed so petty to be jealous when her emotion was so pure, so deep. And so important to her. He was sucked into her dream, he actually *felt* her desires. *Is this what it means to be a woman?* he thought.

On his right was the kid. What thoughts were racing through *his* mind as the alien's voice droned on? At first Matt could not read the boy's mind at all, for it was swarming with tiny thoughts, flitting in confusion like a school of fish. He tried to delve deeper. He found first layer upon layer of distrust, of fear; he saw with crystalline vividness what he had only heard described before, the attack of the aliens on CB's suburban home, the shattering of his childhood world. The kid lived in a fractured universe, that was certain. But beneath all this angst, under the security blanket of his speech mannerisms, there was a very genuine, very endearing little boy. Matt wanted to tell the kid that he understood, that it was okay to be vulnerable after all. But it was a lesson he himself had learned so recently that he felt rather diffident about trying to impart it to someone else. But as the ritual of Zon continued, Matt saw more and more clearly

how much the three of them needed each other.

Then there were the emotions that flooded his senses from the minds of Willie and Ray, too. In Ray's mind, most of all, he felt nostalgia for what might soon no longer be, and great love for the things of nature. In Willie's mind he sensed a terrible aloneness. For Willie was not only an alien among men; he was an alien among his own kind too, an outcast, a traitor, a renegade. He had gone against the collective will of his race, which for centuries had been constrained into a force of consummate evil; but he knew in his heart that where there was great evil there could also be great good.

As the ritual drew to a close, time seemed to stand still. Matt wondered, ***Why, if they had access to such awesome psychic abilities, did the aliens turn their backs on the spiritual? Why, if the human race had been capable of a tenth of these powers, there wouldn't have been any wars, men would have always lived in peace and cooperation with each other . . . wasn't that so?***

He heard a voice in his head, the gentle voice of the alien Willie: "No, Matt, alas, it is not so. There will always be good and evil. Accept, accept, Matt Jones. . .

"I will fight," said Matt passionately.

"Yes, you will always fight. There is something about you that cannot tolerate the terrible things that creatures do to other creatures in the name of self-aggrandizement and conquest," said the voice of Willie inside him. "But there will come a time when even you, Matt, will know your destiny, and bow to it."

"No!" Matt found himself shrieking. Abruptly, the circle broke.

"What was all that about?" CB said sleepily.

"During the ritual of Zon, many people seem to experience lesions," Willie said.

Tomoko laughed. "You mean visions!"

"I guess I do."

"But Willie . . . now that you've played your lizard tricks with our minds," Ray said, "how's about letting us in on this stuff about secret lizard installations?"

"I agree," CB said. "After all, the only way we'll get to Washington at the moment is if we walk, right? And Californians don't walk. If we sneak into some Visitor installation, maybe we'll find some way to hitch a ride, steal a vehicle or something. That's what we've always done in the past, dudes. I guess it's kind of like a habit with our gang."

"I'd lend you my pickup," Ray said, "but I don't see as how you can drive past the border. They have a million checkpoints and barricades between here and Richmond, both human and lizard. And you might not even get by some of the human ones. They're collaborators, some of 'em, and others are just looking out for number one. You'd be dead meat, one way or another."

Willie said, “I will show you all that I’ve discovered. I cannot go to Washington with you, because I’m running low on the antitoxin now, and I have to get down to the dust-free zone, or I’ll die . . . but first I want you to see ...”

“Let’s go, then!” CB shouted, waving the papinium sample, which he had molded, origami-style, into the image of an American eagle.

Chapter 12

Ray's pickup truck careened up and down the steep mountain roads. Tomoko held her breath; CB seemed to be enjoying the ride tremendously, and didn't seem to mind sitting in the back with Matt, although Tomoko thought it would probably make her sick. Even the taxicabs in Tokyo hadn't been this bad! she was thinking as they roared around corners, honked angrily at the one or two passersby. She winced as they nearly collided with huge gray boulders veined with moss.

"Left," said the Willie.

"What?" Tomoko said anxiously, peering up from behind the dashboard. "There isn't even a road there; it's just a footpath into the woods!" "Why are you so anxious?" said Willie. "You just flew a skyfighter through the Grand Canyon, didn't you? And I heard the story of how you parachuted down into the suburbs of Tokyo with Fieh Chan from a burning alien craft. Why should you be worried about dashing through the Appalachians in a pickup truck?"

"Fuckin' A," said Ray.

"Well, this is different," Tomoko insisted, as the truck skidded over a pile of rocks and narrowly missed a pine tree. She screamed. The other two laughed at him. She looked around and saw Matt and CB roaring with mirth in the back. They were shouting something at her, but she couldn't hear it through the rear window.

"Give me a break!" Tomoko said, as they hurtled through the trees.

"Stop now!" Willie said suddenly.

They screeched to a halt that almost send Tomoko crashing through the windshield. Then the five of them clambered out and waited for Willie to direct them. Willie stood there ... he seemed weak. Was the antitoxin wearing off, then? Tomoko thought. She wondered how much time Willie had left, whether he was deliberately planning to sacrifice himself for the success of the resistance. She wondered whether she herself would be willing to die for mankind . . . just as Fieh Chan had. And Fieh Chan hadn't even been a human being . . . nor was

Willie. Was the militaristic culture of the lizards so oppressive, even to the aliens themselves, that those who could not bear to live within its confines must kill themselves for the sake of an alien race? How tragic, Tomoko thought.

She followed the others. Willie led them down pathways moist with fragrant earth. Her feet sank into soft mud. Dry leaves fluttered in her face. ***It must be autumn***, she told herself. ***This is a part of the world where they have seasons. How different it is from Orange County . . . yet this is the reason the lizards have been unable to establish a foothold in***

the northern climes. The seasons are the key. Change, renewal, life itself. As she mused on this irony, a squirrel crossed the footpath. In the distance, beyond that clearing—was that a stag? Yes. It stared so solemnly at her. She remembered that scene in ***Alice Through the Looking Glass***, when the deer told Alice that it did not fear her because “here, in the forest, we have no names.” Tomoko had never imagined there could be so many shades of green, so many browns: umbers, siennas, ochers, sepias, all blending in a subtle and melancholy harmony.

“I love the woods, too, ma’am,” Ray said to her, instinctively understanding her awe. “But they ain’t gonna be here much longer if Willie’s right about them lizard installations.” He hummed an old hit by the Alabama, the country and western group that had been so popular before the aliens’ arrival changed everything forever.

Deeper and deeper into the forest they penetrated. It was so dark, Tomoko thought, and the air so dense and fragrant.

Then ... a strange, sickly sweet odor in the air . . . something burning, perhaps . . . meat?

“What’s that smell?” she asked.

Willie refused to answer her, but suddenly she knew—

“Oh, my God!” she cried. She stifled the scream she knew must come out, tried to dislodge the retching sensation from her throat.

“Yes,” Willie said. “I am afraid you have guessed it. It’s the smell of ... of cooking people!”

“A lizard barbecue,” Matt said grimly. “Look, there they are.”

“This is one of the dust-free zones,” Willie explained. Tomoko noted that he seemed much calmer, and that his expression was not as sickly as it had been before.

“I wanna kill those bastards,” CB said fervently. His eyes seemed far away. “I wanna **kill** them.” She put her hand on his shoulder and steered him in the direction of the others.

“If I see one I’m gonna—I’m gonna—”

“Hush, kid. There’ll be time.”

Then, behind the bushes, she saw—

“Don’t cover my eyes, Tomoko. I can look.” There they were, in a clearing through which pale sunlight shone, three Visitors roasting something on a spit ... a haunch of meat from which still depended the tatters of old jeans . . . they wore their hated uniforms. But not their masks. They had removed their human faces, which were hanging on the bushes like rubber masks you might buy in a joke shop. She saw their eyes glistening like coals glowing in the dark.

“In order to reach the entry way to the installation,” Willie said, “you have to pass those Visitors. Look, there, behind them ... a cave!”

She saw.

The lizards were conversing in their rasping voices. “What are they saying?” Matt said.

Willie listened. “I think they’re saying that . . . the attack will be soon. They are discussing the papinium factor ... the secret network that will penetrate to Washington itself!” He listened some more. “Wait. New orders have come. The operation has been moved up . . . they only have a week to prepare!”

“For what?” Matt said.

“I don’t know,” Willie said. “Except that it has to do with ...” He crouched behind a bush and pricked his ears in a disconcertingly alien gesture. “Wait. The

network of tunnels . . . the papinium labyrinth.”

“Is that how the invasion of the north will come?” Matt said.

“I think so,” Willie said. “Something about . . . Dingwall’s plan.”

“What kind of a name is Dingwall?” Ray said, laughing. “A lizard name?”

“I don’t know anything about him . . . except that it sounds like he’s some kind of secret operative working in the free territories,” said Willie, sighing.

Tomoko stared at the lizards as they gnawed greedily at their grisly meal. They were so near, they were almost touching—

One of them said something to the other two. Scaly fingers grasped laser pistols. “Shit, they’ve smelled us!” Matt said. “I guess it’s time for action, huh, Robin?”

“Yeah, Batman, like, it’s casual,” CB said. Before Tomoko could say anything, Matt pushed her down. She knelt behind an oak tree as a laser burst annihilated a bush. Matt and CB exchanged one glance, then rushed out, somersaulted, kicked at the pistol-clutching hands of two of the reptiles.

The third barked in surprise and began to shoot randomly. Matt scooped up the two lost laser pistols and threw one to Tomoko. “Cover us, dammit!” he rasped. She felt the heavy gun in her arms and instinctively pointed it . . . but she didn’t want to shoot. She stood there and watched the battle. Ray ran to his truck and pulled out a rifle, but before he could spin around and use it a line of blue light grazed his arm and he yelped in sharp pain. Tomoko gritted her teeth and aimed the gun, but she was scared she’d hit Matt and CB and—

Matt was lashing out with his fists now, darting back and forth, too quick for the cold-blooded reptiles. The one who still had the laser gun snarled. CB tackled him and somersaulted between his legs so that the Visitor tripped, his head squishing into the mud. ***If only I could see better, if only it weren’t so dark!*** Tomoko thought, holding up the laser gun and beginning to panic. Where was the trigger on the thing? She’d carried one before, but she’d never been called upon to use it—

The two gunless lizards were getting up now, crawling towards her, mud and slime mingling on their scaly faces, rheum dripping from their canines, a

metallic growling issuing from their throats. They were coming toward her, toward Willie! And he was just standing there, not doing anything, although he too now clutched one of the laser pistols in his hand.

“Do something!” she shrieked.

“Alas,” he moaned, “I cannot ... it is forbidden to me to kill by the precepts of *preta-na-ma* . . . please don’t force me!”

Suddenly Tomoko realized she was going to have to shoot. Ray was injured and her husband was fighting for his life. She saw the kid struggling with a lizard twice his size, who was bearing down on him and seemed ready to sink his teeth into his shoulder, and she had to save him, he had to . . . closing her eyes, she squeezed the trigger and . . .

A ray of blue fire sliced the darkness!

The lizard who had been attacking CB fell lifeless to the ground . . . then the second . . . then the third. But it had not been from Tomoko’s shot. Matt and CB stopped, looked at each other in astonishment.

The aliens were screaming in anguish, their faces were twisted and their limbs twitching like those of a hydrophobic dog. Such hideous death-screams . . . Tomoko trembled, ran into Matt’s arms. “Oh God, I thought I had lost you, I thought—” she said. He didn’t answer, but slowly rolled over the body of one of the aliens with his foot. In the Visitor’s writhings, he had dislodged the missile that killed him.

“Pick that thing up, CB,” Matt said.

The boy obeyed. “Totally awesome!” he exclaimed. “It’s a throwing star . . . and its been dusted with some kind of red powder. That’s why these dudes are, like, history. Even though it’s not a red dust zone. That was a narrow escape, too narrow, Matt. I didn’t realize you had laid in a supply of shuriken.”

“Wait a minute,” Matt said. “You got me wrong. I may be good at ninjitsu, but I can’t kill three aliens at once coming from three different directions with three throwing stars. Not to mention the fact that I don’t even have any of the suckers on me—”

“Then who was it?” Tomoko said.

He shrugged.

Tomoko looked past the clearing, to the cave mouth, up at the boulders that overhung the cavern and rose sheer up past the canopy of treetops, and she thought she saw something move. She pointed. “There,” she said, “look, there, there—”

“What?” They all turned to look, even the wounded Ray, who leaned against the front fender of his truck.

“Don’t you see it?” she said. It wasn’t there any % more. But for a split second she *had* seen something. She was quite sure of it. It was something dark, and it rustled, and there was something glinting, metallic, like the flash of sunlight on metal. It could have been a man, or maybe an animal. She kept thinking it was somehow like a black panther, but she knew that no such creature could possibly exist in the wilds of North Carolina.

Or could it?

“I swear to God, I saw something,” she said softly.

There it was again! The shifting of a garment among the trees that hugged the rockface ... the sound of feet and hands grappling with earth and stone.

This time they all heard it.

“I guess we got a secret helper,” said Ray. “Kind of like the Lone Ranger.”

CB laughed. “More like the *Ronin* Ranger, if you ask me,” he said, grinning and holding aloft the three throwing stars, from which Willie recoiled in terror.

“Forgive me,” Willie said. “I want so much to join you on your quest, but you must find your own path from now on. It is my belief that this cavern mouth is a route to the papinium labyrinth—a network of interlinking passageways that they have been building for a long time now, using converted slave labor—which may even lead all the way to Washington itself! But as for what they are planning to do once they reach Washington . . . even I have been unable to glean this in my spying. It is very high-level indeed, this secret, I suspect. And as to

what Dingwall looks like, or what identity he may be masquerading under . . . who can tell? He may have constructed any of a thousand secret identities—”

“Like Fieh Chan did when he pretended to be Kenzo Sugihara,” CB said excitedly.

“Fieh Chan ...” Matt mused. “You don’t think . . . nah. Impossible.”

“Whatever I saw,” Tomoko said, “at least someone is on our side.” Then she turned to Ray and Willie. “The two of you have been so kind. But Ray, you’re wounded, and Willie, the longer you stay here the more dangerous it will be for you. If our mysterious friend finds out you’re a Visitor—” “No! Don’t call me by that hateful euphoria . . . euphemism,” Willie said mournfully. “I’m one of you. Remember, I loved an Earth girl once, and she died to save me.”

Tomoko grasped his hand. “You must leave,” she said. And she kissed him gently on the cheek. She gave Ray a hug that left bloodsmears on her clothes; he winced a little, but grinned at her.

Ray said to Willie, “You know what, space lizard? You ain’t that bad. I’ll go home and bind my wounds. Then I’ll drive you down to the next alien outpost fifty miles south of here. Reckon I owe you something.”

“Why? I have brought you nothing but trouble,” Willie said.

“You taught me something—that lizards are people too!” Ray said. “C’mon, buddy.” Willie helped him climb back into his pickup truck. In a few moments they were roaring into the shadows.

Matt watched them for a while. Then he said, “We’re on our own again, you guys.” On tiptoe, not wanting to step on a twig or otherwise give themselves away, the three of them made for the cavern mouth. Something gleamed from within . . . something blue and metallic.

The supermetal.

Nervously, Tomoko looked at CB. He was wearing it in his ear again.

Who had rescued them from the three reptiles who guarded the cavern mouth? Who on earth had such skill with the *shuriken*, that he could wield three at once

and score three hits?

I don't dare to hope, she thought to herself. But the memory of Fieh Chan returned to her in all its terror and passion as they entered the womblike entrance to the papinium underworld.

They stepped into the cave—

She gasped.

There was a human skeleton chained to the wall. It wasn't one of those ancient ones that were traditionally found in Hollywood movies about buried treasure or lost kingdoms. This one had been freshly killed, and flesh still hung from it in strips.

“Don't scream,” Matt whispered urgently.

She clamped her own mouth shut and followed the other two grimly.

Chapter 13

“So we really have to go to a reception at the Romanian Embassy?” Dr. Schwabauer said. “It seems like a waste of energy to me. And you know I hate these affairs. I’m a scientist, not a politician. Ever since our arrival in Washington, Setsuko, you’ve seemed very preoccupied with things.” He straightened his thin, old-fashioned black tie once more. He didn’t think he could bring himself to wear one of the new styles in formal wear, some of which were actually copies from the alien’s costumes.

“Well,” Setsuko said, emerging from her bedroom in the splendid costume of a geisha, her face painted white and red, her kimono of gold and purple silk set off by an obi of brilliant blues and fiery oranges. She smelled very fragrant, Schwabauer thought.

Even though they had had to seek refuge here, at the home of Setsuko’s cousin Dr. Yogami, who had once been a member of the Japanese diplomatic mission to the United States in the days when such

things still mattered, even though they were in a new place and had no money, having sold everything they owned in order to bribe their way to America, Setsuko had never ceased to do those little but painstaking things that made her always beautiful to look at: coifing her hair and doing her face and dressing herself from the large wardrobe left by Dr. Yogami’s wife, who had been killed by the lizards in one of the battles of the days before the red dust. Schwabauer marveled at this.

Setsuko continued, “It is important that we associate with the right people, if we are to locate the nexus of the alien spy network. I’ve been suspicious of the Romanian ambassador for some time, because he’s constantly throwing these lavish parties and we have been incommunicado, as you know, with the Romanian government since they became a satellite of the Italo-Greek Visitor-controlled sector. How can he afford these things?”

It was true that this was someone to be suspicious of. Since the saurian takeover of many parts of the globe and the consequent collapse of many forms of government, many diplomats had been stranded in strange countries without any means of support from their devastated governments. Dr. Yogami, who had once

held a reasonably important post as cultural attache, had been reduced to selling hamburgers ... a fate to which, more than once, he had wanted to react by honorable suicide. Indeed, on their first coming to Washington, one of the first things the three of them had done was to talk Dr. Yogami out of performing the act on the very steps of the Japanese chancery. It had been

Fieh Chan/Kenzo Sugihara who had talked him out of it, employing Zen arguments of such arcane complexity that Schwabauer had been (with his halting Japanese) ill able to follow them or construe their meaning.

He wished the man were here now so he could talk Setsuko out of going to the Romanian embassy. Then he would not have to wear these ridiculous clothes.

“By the way, have you heard from him at all?” he said to her.

“Not in several days . . . not since he decided to investigate the network of passageways that we discovered beneath the sewers of Alexandria.”

“Do you actually believe that there may be . . . reptiles in the sewers of this city?”

“There is something going on,” Setsuko said, “though I don’t know what it could be.” She smiled at him, then; but it was a Japanese smile, and he could not determine whether it conveyed grief or joy.

“Well,” he said at last, “I suppose we must go to your reception. Though why these superannuated ambassadors insist on carrying on as if the world was still the way it used to be—”

“Appearances are important to them,” she said. “My cousin Dr. Yogami”—though they were relatives, Schwabauer noted, she still spoke of him in terms of the utmost respect—“still keeps his diplomatic license plates on his car despite the fact that he is now only a lowly hamburger chef. Poor man, it is one of the few shreds of dignity left to him, a small reminder of his former position in the universe. He often speaks of how they enabled him to park in forbidden zones; of course now, with the police practically nonexistent, and with no one knowing to whom their allegiance should lie in the first place, anyone can park anywhere. It is a little thing, but it distresses him profoundly.”

“Yes, it does seem to,” Schwabauer said thoughtfully. “Well, are you ready

now?”

“As I’ll ever be!” said Setsuko, smiling.

Ferenc Andrescu, ambassador of Romania, paced back and forth in the foyer of his mansion, an ivy-covered brick house in McLean, one of Washington’s richest suburbs. He had attempted to contact his government a number of times that day, but to no avail; the lizard viceroy had refused to acknowledge his existence, let alone speak to him. He didn’t know why he even bothered to go into the office anymore.

His butler, Tedescu, entered. “Excellency, if you do not get ready, your guests will find you without appropriate clothing.”

“Dumnezeu!” said the ambassador. “Is it that time already?”

“I’m afraid so, Excellency.”

Sighing, Andrescu followed the butler up to the dressing room and stood like a mannequin while the Tedescu handed him an endless supply of studs, collars and cuffs starched to cardboard, and finally the dinner jacket which had been his since the Second World War.

“I hate this life,” he said, although in truth he would rather be here, stranded though he was, than in Romania. It was not for nothing that he had smuggled out of the country a small wallet containing the jewels of his late wife, who had inherited them from her mother, who had kept them concealed in a little box during the communist takeover of the country so long ago. Those jewels had served him well over the years. Even in Bucharest he had lived well, although he had been forced to be discreet. When he came to America he had been able to live far beyond the limited allowance that the government provided . . . but now there was no more government to nag at him, since those reptiles had extended their influence over Romania. First they had conquered Italy and the Mediterranean, warm countries where the red dust had soon lost its power; slowly they had been extending their sphere of influence. He couldn’t believe the myopia of his government, though! Imagine that, forging an alliance with the lizards just in order to force a break with the Soviet Union! Didn’t they realize that one bunch of overlords was pretty much like another . . . and that at least the Russians had not demanded a tribute of human lives?

“What is the ambassador thinking about?” Tedescu said, as he began meticulously to dust the dinner jacket with a little brush, a thing of camel-hair and silver that Andrescu had possessed at least as long as the jacket itself.

“I was thinking of lizards,” he said. “Ah, those lizards . . . *nosferatu*. ”

“*Nosferatu*, Excellency?”

“Yes. I was thinking of how much they are like our own legends. Do you think that the aliens are actually supernatural beings, like vampires—that they would flee, like *nosferatu*, from the cross and from garlic?” He looked at himself in the full-length mirror and put out his hand for his three medals, which he carefully pinned on to his jacket. “Do you think there would be a magical way of getting rid of them?”

“Do not speak of these things,” Tedescu said, crossing himself. “It is not ... I mean, Excellency, back in my old village they would take a dim view of such talk.”

Andrescu allowed a wan smile to play over his face.

“I had always thought, Tedescu, that there were no monsters in this world . . . *slava domnului!* But now I know that to be untrue. So who is coming to this little reception, my friend? You have perforce become my social secretary, maid, and chef as well as my butler, now that these dark times have come upon us. I do not know how much longer I shall be able to sustain the illusion of maintaining a proper diplomatic mission here.”

“Your old friend Jankowski, the First Secretary at the Polish Embassy, has been reduced to selling women’s underwear at a Lord and Taylor, I have heard,” Tedescu said as he knelt to polish the ambassador’s shoes. “But as for your question, Excellency, we have conjured up a reasonable semblance of a party for tonight. First there is this Dr. Yogami, formerly of the Japanese Mission—he’s now working as a clerk or a hamburger chef, I think, and was most gratified to receive an invitation; he is bringing some friends, scientists I believe. Most of them are your friends; only a couple you have never met. Among them, I think, is a Mr. Dingwall.”

“What an extraordinary name!” Andrescu said. “Of what manner of ethnic origin is that? What diplomatic mission does he represent?”

“He is not an ambassador, Excellency. He is a conductor.”

“Ah, we shall have some culture at last! Tell me, do you think he will be able to breathe some life into my battered old Steinway?”

“Well, I am not certain that he is a very distinguished conductor. He only directs the local Youth Orchestra. And yet . . . he seems to know a lot about the . . .”

“Those infernal lizards! You knew of my fascination with them, and you invited an expert to my reception.”

“Not exactly, Excellency. But he *is* actually conducting an alien symphony.”

“What an extraordinary idea!” Andrescu said, frowning.

“Yes ... do you remember the opening of the new shopping mall, the Spring Oaks Mall, to which you received a formal invitation?”

“Yes,” Andrescu said wryly as he carefully adjusted the twirl of his moustache in the mirror. “Why was I invited, I wonder! They must know that Romania has cut off ties with the free zones of America, having diplomatic representation only with the Visitor government in Los Angeles; that my whole position here is a kind of fraud. Their computer must be using a database that has not

been properly updated. Ah, the whole world is going to seed now that it is no longer our own!” “Well, this Dingwall is conducting the children in a performance of this alien symphony . . . something about interplanetary brotherhood.” “Maybe I’ll go,” Andrescu said. “After all, what else is there to do?”

Far away somewhere, a chime. The doorbell, was it? Why did they always come so soon?

“Tell them I’ll be right down,” he said.

He continued to gaze at his own face in the mirror. Tedescu, standing behind him, was also visible. The ambassador studied the face of his old butler. There was something about it that bothered him. It was in the eyes, he thought. The eyes. For the past few days, the old servant had ceased to look his master in the eye . . . something was wrong. Perhaps he was sick, Andrescu thought, and too

considerate to tell him lest he be forced to spend money on a doctor, a rare commodity in these barbaric times. He could not tell.

He knew only that Tedescu had been almost like a different person of late. He was perfectly attentive in his duties, but he performed them like a zombie. And he walked around with a glazed look in his eye, almost as though—

As though he had been hypnotized!

But was that possible? Andrescu thought to himself as he watched his butler leave the room, his eyes fixed steadfastly ahead of him.

Hypnosis . . . that was a power the old ***nosferatu*** were said to have ... a power to be used upon their

victims—before they killed them and sucked their lifeblood from them.

Could Tedescu have been converted by the lizards?

Impossible! thought Andrescu, as he went to join his guests.

Chapter 14

“Well,” Matt said, “here we are. Now what?”

They were standing in the cave mouth; Tomoko was looking nervously away from the skeleton on the wall. Ahead of them was a passageway that seemed to tunnel deeper into the earth. There was a stairwell; they descended for a long time, their footsteps clanging on the metal, hoping they would not be discovered. Of course, they were still wearing their Visitor uniforms, but Matt had taken the opportunity to refurbish his clothes from the corpses of the aliens outside; he'd found one whose pants fit him better.

Ahead: the gloom deepened as the stairwell ended in a long corridor.

A tunnel: dim light glinting from blue-tinged metal walls.

“Papinium,” CB whispered.

Matt ran his finger along the wall. It was cool to the touch. It didn't feel like metal at all, but a little slick, like the skin of one of the Visitors.

“Now I understand,” CB said. “If there's a secret

labyrinth of tunnels coated with this new metal, then the lizards can travel from place to place whether or not it's full of the red dust, right? And that means that they can burrow right under the noses of the free states, pop up . . . take over. Like Bugs Bunny, only with monsters instead of cartoon characters. Grody!”

“Well, if they can use it, so can we,” Matt said. “This is it—our secret way to Washington.”

“It'll still take too long if we have to walk it,” said Tomoko.

“Well, maybe we should get going—whoa! Hold it right there.” Matt saw them now, stacked up in a niche along the walls . . . metal discs, each big enough for a man to stand on, looking remarkably like Viking shields. “Do you know what I think those are?”

“I think you're right!” CB said. “Look over there, down the tunnel—”

“Duck!” Tomoko whispered. They threw themselves flat against the wall as something whooshed by—

Aliens, not even bothering to wear their human faces, astride the discs and skimming through the tunnels! They were some kind of hoverdiscs . . . they had to work on the same antigravity principle that the Mother Ships worked on!

The aliens halted abruptly. How could they have avoided seeing the three resistance fighters? Matt decided he’d better try to bluff it out.

The lizard hissed viciously at him, his tongue flicking to and fro.

“How dare you speak to me in our native tongue!” Matt said, speaking as harshly as he dared. “You know it is the wish of the supreme commander that we use Earth languages ***all the time***, even among ourselves.”

The lizard was a bit taken aback, but responded in English, after a cursory examination of their uniforms. “Sorry, chief. I didn’t get a good look at the insignia on your trousers. I didn’t realize you were a lieutenant commander. Of course I obey, sir! Besides, I need the practice.”

“You certainly do!” Tomoko rasped at him, getting into the spirit of the charade.

Matt thought: ***Thank God! I know no one really understands the complexities of the alien hierarchy ... but I am so grateful I decided to change pants with the alien outside, the one killed by the mysterious dart.***

“I trust you will recognize me in the future, and stop this appalling impudence?” he said to the aliens. There were two or three of them behind this one, all gazing curiously at them.

The alien said, “I’m sorry, but—in those horrifying monster masks that central command forces us to wear, you can’t tell anyone apart. I mean, sir, I could have sworn that the three of you were disguised as males, not as a man, a woman and a child. But these humans all look alike.”

“Yes, they do, don’t they?” Tomoko said sardonically.

Matt said, “Perhaps you can direct us to . . . er . . .” he floundered and for a moment panicked about giving himself away.

“Sir, you gave those orders yourself!” the lizard said, his wattles coloring with embarrassment. “Are you testing me? But the main group will amass next week for Mission Shopping Mall, and the main Washington nexus is—let me see — fourteen branches down and right and seventeen more. Right?”

Matt grunted noncommittally.

The lizards climbed back on their discs and zoomed away.

“Our turn,” said Matt.

“How do they work?” Tomoko said.

“Beats me. Trial and error?” He strode over to the stack of hoverdiscs and took one out, hefting it—it was almost weightless due to the effect of the antigravity device—and put it down on the packed-earth floor of the tunnel. Then he climbed onto it.

“Let’s see now,” he said. “Er . . . SHAZAM! MXYZPTLK! ABRACADABRA! XYZZY! I give up.”

“Let me try,” Tomoko said, replacing him atop the little disc.

It didn’t budge.

Both of them turned to CB.

“You didn’t ask me,” he said, laughing.

He jumped up onto one, did a sort of gyrating movement with his feet, and it rose into the air! Then he bent his knees, his whole body curving into the direction of flight, and ... he was off!

“Wait!” Matt shouted at the tiny figure way down the tunnel, almost indistinguishable in the dimness.

CB came back, still laughing, and did a swift cartwheel off the still-hovering device.

“How’d you do that?” Matt said, bewildered.

“I watched,” CB said. “Besides, it’s easy. It’s kinda like breakdancing.”

“And whoever said breakdancing was easy,” Tomoko said.

“It’s never too late to learn, you old farts!” CB taunted, and he leaped back onto his disc and was soon doing fancy maneuvers, making it spin and dance and even do a kind of wheel-less wheelie in the air.

“Well, time for you and me,” Matt said.

He and Tomoko climbed on, copied CB’s graceful movements, and took off!

In a few minutes they were drifting smoothly through the tunnels, with Tomoko carefully counting the turns as they sped on. They must have been doing a hundred miles an hour. The tunnels went on and on, only occasionally splitting off. How long had it taken them to build these things? And how had it been done?

Matt soon found out.

“Stop!” he heard Tomoko whisper against the windroar of their flying.

They slowed.

Then he saw people working on a shaft of the papinium labyrinth . . . human beings. He knew they were human beings because they had been chained hand and foot. A uniformed lizard was actually standing over them with a blaster and a bullwhip. Another was lashing a woman who had collapsed from exhaustion and was struggling to free herself from the chains. There had to be little oxygen down that shaft, but the saurians showed no quarter.

“She’s sick! She’s gonna **die!** You gotta release her!” CB shouted at the lizards.

“Don’t say anything!” Tomoko said.

It was too late. They had been spotted.

He heard one lizard bark to another, “There they are—they must be the ones who killed the lieutenant commander and disguised themselves—they actually fooled our friends into thinking **they** were us! Let’s get them!”

“Quick! Let’s escape on the discs!” shouted Tomoko, and they were off! “If word is out, they’ll be looking for us!”

They turned a corner as they fled—

Dead end!

And they were face to face with someone Matt knew he had seen before.

A bloated lizard in a human skin, so fat that the disguise was stretched into a hideous distortion of humanity, standing at the head of a group of armed, ululating reptiles!

He recognized her . . . out in the desert, she had been in the patrol truck. He had seen her face, flushed with fury, as it pulled alongside the skyfighter and they escaped—

“We meet at last, Matthew Jones, the notorious ninjitsu expert!” said the lizard, slime dribbling from her lips. “We shall soon see how your martial arts stack up against laser pistols!”

Matt turned.

Five or six more of them stood behind, their lasers aimed. Tomoko cried out. CB was white with terror.

“Shall I do the introductions?” the reptile said. “I am Medea.”

Chapter 15

They were manacled, led down secret passageways, down stairwells, and finally into a subterranean monorail where they were chained in a foul-smelling train car along with about twenty others—ragged, filthy people covered with sores, with their hair matted and their faces streaked with mud and blood. A lizard overseer stood watch over them while more prisoners were shoved into the car. Tomoko could hardly breathe, although the car had two ventilation slits that admitted some of the dank, dusty air from the tunnel outside.

An old man coughed up blood.

The others shrugged.

They all had that familiar glazed look in their eyes.

“They’ve been converted,” Tomoko said.

“Are you sure?” Matt whispered.

“Like, of course they are,” CB said. “Can’t you tell, don’t you remember?” Matt nodded. Sure he remembered, Tomoko thought, and she herself thought of the time they had infiltrated into Osaka Castle and they had seen the hordes of converts,

soulless and mindless, whom the lizards had created—an army without souls, the heartless Mu-rasaki had called it. Tomoko hoped they wouldn’t get her. *I’ll die first*, she told herself.

The monorail hummed. They were moving rapidly now, although the motion was almost imperceptible thanks to the aliens’ high-tech engineering. “It probably works on that antigravity principle,” CB mused. “That’s the only way they could get such a smooth ride out of it.”

“How can you think of engineering when we’re about to be killed—or worse, converted into slaves to work for their evil ends?” said Tomoko.

“I’m thinking of a way to sabotage this sucker,” CB said disconsolately.

She was amazed at his spirit. She herself knew they were doomed, they had to be; no one was going to jump out of the bushes and save them, as the alien swordmaster once had, time and time again—

But she **had** seen something out there, outside the cave mouth, climbing the rocky face of the mountain.

The other passengers said nothing; they didn’t complain, they didn’t even groan from their very evident aches and wounds. They were like zombies. **Zombies!**

They pulled in to what looked like an underground junction of some kind. Chain gangs of human slaves were being herded in different directions by bored-looking aliens, who occasionally roused themselves into striking one of their victims. Now and then one of them dropped, his chains were sawed loose by a blast from a laser pistol, and he was left behind. Tomoko saw, coming up the tunnel, a grisly metal cart that moved up and down the aisle, with mechanical arms that cleared away the bodies and piled them up onto itself. It appeared to be grinding them . . . turning them into—

“Holy shit,” said CB. “They’re making People Nuggets out there. Oh, Jesus. **Now** I’m scared. I can’t take it.”

They were led into a large hall in which two or three dozen aliens lounged about on sofas. A metal cage rested on the floor; Tomoko, Matt, and CB were forced to enter it. Then the cage was raised up on a pulley and attached to the ceiling. The hall was carved out of solid rock, and completely coated with papinium, lending it a blue-purple sheen. It was very beautiful, Tomoko thought ... if one did not know its purpose.

Medea was reclining on a divan talking to a number of other lizard high-ups. On a monitor screen that hung against one wall, they could see a face fifteen feet high . . . the face of Diana herself, leader of the alien forces—the most hated female on Earth!

And that face was beaming, it was replete with pleasure; its eyes were glittering with bloodlust.

The other lizard commanders were regarding Medea with bemusement, the cage

with hunger and lust, and Diana with awe.

Diana said, “Eat them! Now! Before they have a chance to interfere with our plans again!”

Medea smiled. “Look at all that food,” she said, “hanging in the basket over us. How enticing it is.” The others snarled their delight.

Tomoko shuddered.

CB said, “Now I know what a hamburger feels like.”

Matt said, “If we’re going to die anyway, I’m going to say what I want to those goddamn lizards!” He stood up in the cage—Tomoko winced as she saw him pinching the bars with his toes—and shouted down to them, “Hey, you there! You can kill us and grind us up and feed on us, but there’re only three of us, and we’ve already wasted dozens of you guys! You come here with your skyfighters and your laser pistols and you have machines that can take away our souls, but ... all you can do is kill us. Others will take our place. This is our world, damn it. Go home! Go back to your stinking, joyless, desert world where even water is scarce!”

Medea stiffened at these insults; she got up and motioned for the cage to be lowered so that they were almost eye to eye. Then she stood and peered at them.

Matt spat at her in the face.

She licked it off, her tongue swabbing the dermo-plast mask, flicking back and forth like a snake’s, “Delicious,” she said. “Thank you for that little preview of dinner.”

Then she shot her tongue out at CB.

Matt was too quick for her. Tomoko watched with admiration as he reached out and grabbed the tongue with a swift twist of the wrist, and began to pull. He started climbing up the walls of the cage, pulling the slimy thing along with it. “Watch out,”

she screamed, “the venom!”

Sure enough, Medea was preparing to spew forth venom. She could see the poison glands palpitating as the fangs within released the hideous green fluid.

The juices were running down the tongue now, droplets of it streaming down the floor and seething as they stuck the papinium-lined surface—

“Let go, Matt! Or she’ll kill you!” Tomoko shouted. She didn’t dare reach out and grab the tongue herself, but if Matt didn’t let go—

The lizards were gathering around now, taunting, laughing, when—

Suddenly a thin pencil of light streaked across the chamber and sliced off part of Medea’s tongue!

She heard shrieking, heard Medea’s howl of pain. Wildly, she looked around. Matt thrust the still ftbrillating tongue away from him, and she watched in terror-stricken fascination as the thing, still not quite dead, wrapped itself around the iron bars of their cage, seething, wriggling—

Then the throwing stars started to fly.

Reptiles fled! Medea, still clutching the outstretched portion of her tongue, which still dripped venom on the floor, was yelping as she staggered out of the chamber. Who had saved them? Suddenly Tomoko saw—

He was standing in the doorway of the hall, completely swathed in a ninja costume that seemed to have been steeped in papinium, for it shone with the same bluish luster as had the walls of the subterranean labyrinth.

No wonder they had not seen him before. He had

blended in perfectly with the papinium of the walls. The blue ninja drew out a sword.

He leaped. Tomoko would never forget that leap, that tremendous arc of energy with which the blue ninja struck down the cord that held up their cage and sent it crashing to the ground. He ran, sword still outstretched, towards them, swinging the sword left and right in rhythmic strokes, as uniformed aliens tried to rush him on either side wielding an assortment of whips and blasters— Aliens were crumpling to the ground on either side, and above it all was the face of Diana,

gazing upon this spectacle with an expression of ever-increasing consternation.

Tomoko could hear her voice rasping out above the whistling of the sword and the screams of the struck reptiles. “What’s the matter now? Will someone tell me what is going on? Someone must report to me immediately—or I’ll have them court-martialed and executed!”

The blue ninja had reached the door of the cage. White sparks flew as he brought the sword slashing again and again on the bolt, rusty from the humidity of the lizard’s lair.

The three of them ran out. There were still aliens everywhere, though many of them were wounded or dying. One of them rushed Matt, who with a flying leap twisted his neck. CB cartwheeled over another of the aliens and, his hands pointed like daggers, sliced into the chest of one of them, whose blood spurted, green and frothing, over them all. A bagpipe squalling issued from its lips.

Again and again the ninja thrust ... the swordblade danced in the air ... a sliver of silver of light that lanced the darkness.

“Come,” he shouted. “Follow me.”

Tomoko ran, blindly following the blue ninja’s lead. CB and Matt came after, kicking and flailing all the way. “This way!” the ninja rasped, shoing them into a tunnel that seemed to narrow into a mere crawlspace.

“I’m the only one who can get through this thing,” CB said. They could see a small circle of dim light at the other end.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to,” said the ninja. “There is a control panel at the other end, a master switch that disables the monorail system. This crawlspace pops out at the top of the main computer complex that they use to monitor all that goes on in the papinium labyrinth ... do you see it?”

CB was already at the other end of the shaft. His voice, muffled and distant, came through. “Yeah. There it is.”

The ninja said, “Tap the third button . . . the one with the hieroglyph that looks sort of like a squiggly snake.”

Tomoko heard a rushing noise, thunderous, disturbing. After a few seconds she realized it wasn't a noise at all—it was silence. For the humming of the underground monorail had never stopped until that moment, and she had become so used to it as to lose awareness of it; its cessation came as a shock.

“Now,” said the blue ninja, “we must climb.” He drew a dart from a fold of his robe, aimed it at the ceiling, and threw it. It hit something up there, and a shaft of light fell down and made a wide circle in the floor of the tunnel. “They’ll be after us soon,” he said. “There’s very little time.” “Who are you, anyway?” Matt said. “Are you the one who saved us, out there? Are you the one who—”

“I cannot speak my name; I have none.”

Tomoko said, “I know who you are ... I cannot forget your voice . . . you are truly he . . .”

“No!” he cried. “The man you think I am is dead, killed in the explosion that destroyed a great castle and the Visitors’ plan to destroy a distant land—”

“Kenzo Sugihara!” CB squealed. “Totally rad!” “Fieh Chan!” Matt shouted at the same time. “No time for guessing games. Those people are all dead. I have no name now. Only the ritual of Zon sustains me. Come. Enter this shaft of light. It is a forcebeam, advanced alien technology, that will transport us to an upper level of this—” Linking their hands, they waited for a moment and were whisked up to a different tunnel. The stench was overpowering. There was green slime everywhere, and Tomoko was reeling from the odor of human excrement.

“Where have you brought us?” Tomoko asked, almost gagging.

All she could see were his expressionless eyes. She wanted to ask him so much—what he was doing so far from Japan, how he had managed to escape the explosion with his life—but couldn't say the words. But the old emotions welled up: the fear, the confusion, at last the love. The blue ninja, who had once styled himself the alien swordmaster, who had always delighted in secret identities and mysterious appearances and disappearances, was back with them. An excitement filled her. She wanted to cry out for joy, but she stifled herself for fear of arousing some enemy sentinels. All she could say was, “Where are we, where are we?”

“Where?” said the alien swordmaster. “You are nearer your destination than you

think, for these are the sewers beneath the suburbs of Washington . . . in the northern Virginia city of Alexandria.” “The sewers? Sewers as in ‘alligators in the sewers?’” said CB. “Radical!”

Scuffling noises in the distance.

“Uh oh,” Matt said. “They weren’t long in coming, were they?”

They started to run.

Chapter 16

Medea crawled back into the hallway, regarding the recent carnage with distaste. The fifteen-foot-tall visage of Diana still glared down at her from the wall monitor.

“Once again,” Diana said, “you’ve failed me, you pathetic creature. Can’t you do anything right?”

“I’m going after them,” Medea screeched. “They’ll never make it to freedom. Even if they’ve already crossed into the free zone. I’ll release the papinium tanks!”

“And give away Dingwall’s carefully laid plan?” Diana said disdainfully.

“Please, Diana!” Medea begged. “I swear I’ll have them for you . . . and soon.”

“Indeed.”

Medea saw, through the window in front of which her commander was seated, a panorama of downtown Los Angeles. Was that fire spewing from the windows of a skyscraper? She did not envy Diana’s task of controlling the angry mob of the “free city” over which her colleague held sway. *My*

task is infinitely easier, she thought. *The capture of three miserable refugees*. She wondered why those three had shown such resistance despite their desperate odds. Something about the psychology of these humans was very disturbing to her sensibilities.

She said, “Give me one more chance, Diana. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Diana said, “You weary me ... I simply don’t have time to deal with any of this. Do whatever you want. I’ll deal with you later. When I have the time.”

Gratified at what she took to be *carte blanche*, Medea left the hall and began rounding up lieutenants. When she reached the control center of the papinium labyrinth, she was informed that someone had switched off the entire monorail system. She bristled and seethed for a few moments, then called for Dingwall on

the communications network.

A blank screen greeted her despite her use of the top-secret code.

At length an audio message came over the console: "I have gone to a reception at the Romanian Embassy and will return in approximately three hours. Please leave a message."

What impertinence! Medea thought. Well, he was still her subordinate, at least for now, and she was the highest ranking Visitor in the sector. She turned around and began to snarl at the lieutenants, who scurried to obey.

Except for one old reptile who croaked, "But, Medea, if we unload the papinium vehicles, won't this interfere with the plans for the invasion of Washington?"

She castigated him for his impertinence and left him in a huff.

"Look . . . there seems to be a manhole or something," said Matt. "And a ladder."

It was slick with grease, but somehow they managed to negotiate it.

Matt's head emerged in the middle of an alley; a brick wall to the left, a boarded-up computer store to the right. "Come on," he said, helping Tomoko and the kid get to the street. They looked around. The blue ninja followed them, melding unobtrusively into the light of evening.

"I hoped you would come," Tomoko said.

And Matt felt once more all the confusion he had felt when the alien swordmaster had come into his life before and had seemed to steal away the love of his wife and son ... he felt both joy and resentment. He said, "Why do you always have to be so goddamn mysterious all the time?"

The blue ninja said, "I do not dare be known." "What name are you using these days?" CB said. "And what's happened to Setsuko? And to Professor Schwabauer?" Matt said. "Are they languishing away in Tokyo somewhere?"

"No," said the blue ninja. "They are here, and safe. I believe that they are at the Romanian Embassy at this very moment, enjoying delicious food and drink. The

lizard conquest couldn't be farther from their minds, my friends. So why don't we join them there, and give them a little surprise?"

"And where would the embassy be?" Matt asked suspiciously.

"In McLean, about ten miles from here."

"And how are we going to get there?" Matt said. He didn't think it was a particularly unreasonable question, but the blue ninja had a twinkle in his eye; was he mocking him? It was impossible to tell under all that clothing. Even the small aperture in the ninja costume for the eyes was filmed over with something that resembled cellophane and carried a slight bluish tinge . . . obviously a sheet of papinium stretched to monomolecular thinness, to guard against any possible contamination by the red dust microorganisms that still lurked in the atmosphere here.

The others began laughing at Matt now.

"All I wanted to know was how we're going to travel ten miles in our condition," Matt said. "Why're you guys acting like I'm stupid? What are we supposed to do, hail a cab or something?" "Why not?" said the ninja.

A cab pulled up to the corner of the alley, where a sign read "King Street."

Tomoko said, "Matt . . . we're in the Washington area now. We've reached the free zone. There's no lizard jurisdiction here—"

Suddenly Matt understood. As the blue ninja hailed a rather startled cab, he said, "We're free." He wanted to shout it out. But he was still afraid to. He didn't want to trust this vehement upsurge of emotions.

They climbed into the taxi.

A few miles to the south, people heard rumbling noises as they sat down to dinner in their condominiums.

They shuddered, shrugged, and tried to get on with their food.

Dingwall permitted himself a smarmy smile as he took another sip of vodka. A foul Earth drink, he thought, nauseating in every way. But he had to stay in

character.

The ambassador in turn tried to smile back, though the man made him distinctly uncomfortable. “I don’t understand,” he was saying, “why you would want to conduct music written by our arch-enemies, these saurians . . . and the daughter of Tedescu, my manservant, who is a member of your little ensemble, tells me it is a horrid-sounding piece, replete with cacophonous chords and unpleasant jangling effects—though, you understand, my personal taste is rather lowbrow. Since coming to this country I have rarely listened to anything more arcane than the local popular songs.”

“It always takes time to appreciate new things,” Dingwall said firmly, “and art knows no barriers of war or even species ... it is universal.” What a disgusting platitude, he thought. But it was just the sort of thing these people loved to hear.

The hall was now fairly crowded with tuxedo-clad luminaries. Of course, the party scene had become much depleted by decimation of Washington’s diplomatic corps; almost everyone who was anyone had therefore turned up here. There were even some New York people; Dingwall saw, peeping out from behind the capacious bust of some patroness of the arts, the leonine visage of Isaac Asimov, who was apparently writing a book on the impact of the saurian invasion on the free states.

“It’s my four-hundredth book,” Asimov was proclaiming as the steatopygious woman oohed and aahed resoundingly. “But with the paper shortage and censorship in alien-controlled areas, my publisher is only going to issue it in mini-floppy format.”

A vague rumbling could be heard in the distance.

Could it be? Surely not! Dingwall dismissed the suspicion from his mind. It would not do to think of such a thing now, when everything was falling so nicely into place.

“Will it rain, do you think?” the ambassador was musing.

Ah, rain, of course, rain! That noise was only thunder then, Dingwall thought, relieved. He had forgotten that on this obscenely lush planet water frequently fell right out of the sky in enormous quantities. He laughed at himself. To think that he’d almost thought that that far-off thunder could be . . . ridiculous! He said, “I

think it may well rain, Your Excellency.”

“Well, whatever, I’ve decided to go to your little performance. There’s so little to do these days . . . and any diversion will be welcome, even if it is an afternoon of utter cacophony. Besides, the opening of a new shopping mall . . . perhaps I will be able to buy something.”

Good, Dingwall thought. Another victim. Whom had he successfully garnered tonight to be unwitting victims of his great invasion? Already he had half the bigwigs of the free states of the eastern seaboard convinced; tonight he had picked up many more, including Asimov himself, Dr. Charles Sheffield, the head of some corporation that controlled the placement of the few satellites the earthlings were still able to muster, Sir John Augustine, the British Ambassador (Britain being one of the few who had full ties with the free states and did not recognize the authority of the Visitors), and several members of the cabinet of the U.S., which persisted in calling itself a free nation despite the obvious facts . . . how troublesome! Then there was that troublesome Schwabauer and his scientist-geisha friend Setsuko. There they were, chatting away with Asimov. Doubtless discussing some arcane mysteries of their primitive pseudoscience! Soon they would be discussing it in hell—or, at the very least, within the uncomfortable confines of a microwave oven. Dingwall’s mouth watered at the prospect. McLean was a perfect spot from which to launch an attack on unsuspecting humans, for it was inhabited by many of the city’s elite, many of whom had children in the Youth Orchestra, and who would be dragged to the concert by their charges—

Little did they know they would be the first victims in an all-out assault on the former capital of the United States!

He smiled smoothly at the Romanian ambassador and said, “I daresay you will come to like the

music after a while. It grows on you.”

The rumbling from outside continued.

The taxi turned off the George Washington Parkway and began to wind down Kirby Road, a hilly pathway that threaded the houses of the rich.

“I think we’re almost there,” said the blue ninja. A thunderous rumbling—distant

at first, it grew to an earsplitting din. As they turned into the driveway of the embassy, CB screamed, “Gash me with a ginsu! Someone’s following us!”

They had had ten minutes of freedom. Matt reflected as he turned around to see enormous vehicles, coated in blue metal, gaining rapidly on them—vehicles armored and impregnable and topped with laser cannon that were even now pointed straight at them!

Ten minutes of freedom! Had it been worth it?

Chapter 17

And now the rumbling burst upon their senses. The guests were running towards the great French windows of the Andrescu mansion and gasping at what they beheld: four desperate figures fleeing across the lawn, diving for cover among the elegantly sculpted bushes, and an enormous vehicle, tanklike but hovering without wheels over the grass, an eerie cold blue in the moonlight. On its roof a laser turret whirled and whined, repeatedly taking aim and firing great blasts of blue light across the night.

Dingwall watched the spectacle in alarm, elbowing Sir John and Isaac Asimov out of the way in his haste to reach the windows. One of them shattered at that very moment. A chandelier crashed onto an enormous platter of ham.

I ordered no attack, Dingwall thought, as he desperately considered how to intervene without blowing his cover. Who were the figures fleeing across the grass? One of them was garbed as a ninja, the others were a man, a woman, and a child dressed in the tattered remnants of Visitor uni-

forms. They must be the notorious Jones family whose escape everyone had been discussing earlier. What was he to do?

The Romanian Ambassador was plowing through the throng now, his fists upraised. He was shouting, "This is a diplomatic mission, do you hear? This estate is the sovereign territory of Romania, and cannot be violated! I'll complain to the United Nations! I'll complain to Visitor Headquarters, with whom my government has a treaty! *Dumnezeu*, heads will roll for this transgression of immune territory!"

"I say, hear hear," Sir John Augustine was saying, "Jolly bad show, if you ask me! Fancy that!" Dingwall pushed his way through to the Ambassador's side.

"They're obviously not aliens," Asimov was explaining. "Not only are their costumes dishevelled, ill-fitting, and evidently stolen, but they wouldn't be able to survive in this red dust-infested environment for long if they were saurians."

"In that case, we must rescue them! Tedescu, summon the security!"

Inwardly Dingwall laughed. The paltry security forces of the embassy would be no match for a papinium tank! But he had to get them to turn back before they accidentally revealed the secret of next week's invasion. Time was of the essence.

Two or three armed guards appeared and began to shepherd the guests toward inner rooms of the residence. The buffet table was overturned. Food flew everywhere. Shards of glass were raining down from where the French windows had been struck, and a young woman was whimpering as she tried to pull splinters from her arms.

The guardsmen started to fire at the tank with their machine guns. The reports echoed in the carefully landscaped woods that bordered Kirby Road. Somewhere beyond, an explosion: one of the guests' limousines had undoubtedly caught fire from a stray laser blast. The crowd was screaming now.

"Tedescu!" the ambassador screamed.

Dingwall smiled.

He was sure that Ambassador Andrescu did not know that his faithful valet had already been converted in Dingwall's own private little dungeon.

The old man shuffled towards them.

"More guards," said the ambassador.

The old man pulled a walkie-talkie out of his uniform and began to speak rapidly in Romanian.

Then he said to the ambassador, *vii nimeni . . . le e greu sa vina la noi. "*

What was he saying? Dingwall regretted that he had not bothered to learn more than one of their languages, but the pain of forcing their subreptilian argot to his tongue had been too much pain for him. When Andrescu frowned, however, he understood that Tedescu must somehow be conveying to him the fact that there were no more guards, that he was having difficulty in rousing them—

Of course he was! For Tedescu had been obedient and given most of them the day off, just as Dingwall had instructed.

How crafty I am, Dingwall thought, to have planned for such an eventuality! Brains such as mine, and not a passionate temperate such as Medea's, are what enable one to rise to the dizzying heights of the High Command.

And now—what a stroke of luck! One of the guards had been mortally wounded, and lay screaming, ignominiously buried beneath a mound of salad. Dingwall couldn't resist a derisive chuckle as he sidled up to the dying man and wrested the machine gun out of his hand.

He came up to the ambassador and, sounding, he hoped, convincingly like John Wayne or one of those other Earthly heroes, cried out, "Don't worry, Your Excellency! I'll help hold down the fort!"

Then, springing over the table and wildly brandishing his weapon, he ran towards the tank, firing randomly, as the crowd gasped in terror and admiration. He ran down the steps, reaching for the communicator hidden in his pocket and praying he would get out of earshot of the guests before he was killed by one of his own subordinates in the tank.

"Duck!" Matt heard CB's shriek and rolled onto the grass. Only a few more feet now and they'd reach the mansion. Just a little more . . .

He closed his eyes. Searing pain knifed his arm as a laser-burst grazed him and burned a black path into the lawn. It hurt so much. Was it worth it? He might as well die now, he thought. It was useless, so useless.

The tank was rolling after CB and Tomoko now. Another second and it would crush them. The blue ninja was facing the tank defiantly, with his sword

upraised, but what could he do? There wasn't any point, it was all useless

Suddenly the tank stopped firing for a few seconds and whirled to a hold over a bed of flowers. A black man in a tuxedo was walking purposefully towards the tank, shouting into some sort of device in his palm . . . maybe in this lull they could make it into the mansion, at least. "Run, now!" he yelled. He and his companions sprinted madly across the few remaining feet of lawn. They ran, breathless, into the crowd, who didn't know how to react. Some of them were recoiling, screaming, thinking they were lizards; maybe because they still wore the ragged uniforms.

At that moment a familiar voice roared to them across the tumult: “Matthew Jones . . . Tomoko Jones . . . *mein lieber Gott, ich habe euch vermifit* . . . but Herr Ambassador, these are my friends, my very good friends, they are not reptiles, they are the ones who saved Japan—”

Matt was too overwhelmed to think anymore. Exhausted, he collapsed onto a bloodstained Louis Quinze sofa and stared dully at the people who milled about and chattered.

Meanwhile, the black man was alone on the lawn, waving a machine gun. To everyone’s astonishment, a small portal opened up in the vehicle, and two enormous robot arms shot out and gripped him fast. He appeared to be struggling and screaming for help as he was dragged into the tank.

When he was safely inside, Dingwall began to rail at the Visitors who were crammed in front of

the papinium tank’s control console.

“How dare you invade before the appointed day. Do you realize what this may have cost us, you fools? If I find out which of you is responsible—” “But, Dingwall,” one of them blurted out, “instructions came from your superior officer.” “Diana would never command such a thing! You’re lying. Diana well knows the importance of the papinium factor, and she certainly wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize the possible reconquest of part of the northeastern sector.” What a relief it was to be addressing these cringing lackeys, Dingwall thought, and not have to worry constantly about his disguise! Enjoying his rage, knowing it might be the last thing he would enjoy if all hell broke loose over his pet project, he allowed his voice to rise to a truly terrifying metallic timbre. “I’ll see to it that you’re shipped back home on the next available transport! I’ve had enough of incompetents like you, who don’t even have the intelligence to make up decent lies! Diana’s orders indeed. You use her name like some kind of magic word, but—”

“If you please, commander,” began the subordinate diffidently, “It wasn’t Diana who gave the order.”

“Then who was it?”

But he had already guessed. That meddlesome Medea, still technically superior

to him in rank, was up to her Machiavellian antics again! He was infinitely weary of all this . . . why couldn't Diana simply have courtmartialled the bitch? But no, that gluttonous balloon exercised some kind of hold

over the supreme commander

“Very well,” he said at last. “I suppose you’re not entirely to blame. But I want you to rough me up now. Bruise me, hit me on the head.”

“But commander—”

“Do it! I order you to! I intend to look like a tremendous hero to these people, to turn this apparent setback into a stunning ploy for sympathy.”

He reeled as the lackey obeyed. *He's enjoying this a little too much*, he thought. He reminded himself to see that the creature was properly demoted as soon as he got back into a position of authority again—which, he was sure, this latest stunt would make very possible indeed.

Blows to his face and chest! The pain, burning, burning . . . there had to be no saurian bodily fluids, he told himself. The blood that ran down his face, dark and crimson, flowed from a little sac he had had installed in the dermoplast of his face. It did not reflect the pain within, but it ran into his eyes and affected his vision. “All right! Enough!” he grated.

They let go.

He emerged, battered and staggering, onto the lawn. The papinium tank roared as its antigravity hover-engines started up, and began to move away, kicking up stones and setting off little whirlwinds of dead leaves.

Feigning great distress, Dingwall gasped, “I told them . . . diplomatic status . . . threatened them . . . international asylum records . . . they saw reason . .

Then he collapsed into the arms of Tedescu, the ambassador's butler and his secret slave. As he pretended weakness, he fixed the convert's eyes with a hypnotic stare; he snared the creature in a net of mind control. Tedescu gazed blankly ahead like a zombie. Which, of course, was precisely what he was, Dingwall thought with satisfaction.

At once the servant began to exclaim, as the ambassador rushed up to see what the matter was, “*Este erou!*”

Andrescu proclaimed, “This man is a hero! He has made the marauding Visitors see the light of diplomatic reason, and has sent them back to the no-man’s land from which they came. A diplomatic triumph, in a small way!”

The guests started to cheer.

Tedescu carried Dingwall into the reception hall, where tables and sofas were hastily being moved.

Dingwall saw the wounded Matt Jones on the divan; he saw Tomoko and a strange fellow in a blue ninja costume; he saw the boy. If only he could kill them this very minute!

But that would only spoil the fun.

And give the game away.

He would get to them soon . . . soon!

Through the blur of sweat and tears, Matt saw lights: glittering, crystalline, swaying slightly from a vaulted, sculpted ceiling. The faces of his friends ... of CB, of Tomoko, of Fieh Chan, of Professor Schwabauer and Setsuko . . . was she wearing a geisha costume? Here in McLean, Virginia? Voices chattering; champagne glasses clinking; laughter.

I’m dreaming.

The blue ninja said, “We are safe for now, Matt Jones, my friend. Apparently we have been rescued by the conductor of a local youth orchestra.” “Orchestra—”

Music now, from somewhere far away.

A figure who resembled Bela Lugosi stood in front of them. When he opened his mouth, he *sounded* like him too.

“Welcome,” he said. “I am Ferenc Andrescu, your host. I am supposed to be the Romanian Ambassador here, but I have lately been dispossessed and live here

only on suffrance and on my dwindling treasures. I have heard much of your sufferings, Matt Jones, from this man Schwabauer and from his friend. You shall stay here as my guest. I think of it as a sacred trust.”

“Thanks,” Matt whispered. Someone thrust a champagne glass into his hand. He thought: ***What are we celebrating?*** He said, “We should be fighting them! Now!”

“Not yet, Matt Jones,” said Andrescu. “You must hide your anger deep within yourself. Our conductor friend has parlayed a truce, and it must be remembered that we are theoretically at peace with the Visitors, here in the free states; there is ostensibly no war going on, and our freedoms are supposed to be respected by them.”

“No war with the lizards!” Matt groaned. “No war? But we—our enemies, our birthright, our planet—” He was floundering for words, but could find nothing to express his horror.

“One thing at a time, Matt,” Setsuko whispered.

He felt her hand on his forehead, swabbing the blood with a damp, cool cloth. “For the moment, we are still free.”

“Still . . . free . . .” He could think no more. Blissful blackness invaded his consciousness; the wavering chandeliers blinked out; the voices were stilled.

After a while Tomoko made CB leave the party and go to bed. That was the first sign he had that they had returned to some semblance of civilization. No one had ordered him to go to bed in a long time. Though he put up the customary protests, he was secretly relieved that they were treating him like a kid once more, and he retreated to the bedroom in the suite to which the ambassador had assigned them.

The noises of the party came, very faintly, from downstairs.

I’m just too hyper to sleep yet, he told himself.

There was a television in the living room of the suite. He sat on the floor and started clicking the remote, flicking from channel to channel.

There weren't that many channels, not like in the old days of cable TV and 87 channels and HBO and Showtime. The lizards had taken over the satellite network that had once ringed the Earth and provided its inhabitants with the ceaseless information flow that kept it all together. But now no more.

He watched a Bugs Bunny cartoon for a while. It was the one where Bugs Bunny goes up in a rocket and lands in a weird alien landscape and is being chased around by Marvin Martian, who is about to destroy the Earth with a "space modulator," and . . . well, he'd seen it many times before. But it wasn't funny any more, not with real aliens in real spaceships who really might destroy the real Earth

Then there was an announcer of some kind: news, maybe.

Everyone's excited about the grand opening of the Spring Oaks Mall next week. The mayor said in an interview that this heralds a new age in our economic prosperity, and proves that we can live side by side with the Visitors in a peaceful coexistence

Views of an uncompleted shopping mall. Banners. Signs.

At the opening ceremony, the McLean Youth Orchestra will perform the world premiere of a work by an alien composer. The Galactic Symphony, by Loukas Stourmwitch, is a work designed to promote intergalactic brotherhood... the composer could not, because of the red dust infestation, be present at the ceremony, but has sent a congratulatory note from the Visitors' home planet.

CB remembered how the aliens had dismembered and eaten his parents before his very eyes. He couldn't stand to hear this news. Was it better to be free, when you became blind to what the aliens really were, to the fact that they were despoilers, pitiless, sadistic? Angrily, he switched it off.

Then he heard a melody coming from a distant part of the house. It was some kind of musical instrument; sometimes it would sound haunting, at other times it squawked hideously. Someone practicing.

What the hell? he thought. He got up, threw on a Japanese sleeping robe, and went out into the hall.

It was a lonely, big house. The sounds of the party were subsiding, and the music

was more clear now. It was a clarinet, he thought, or maybe a saxophone.

He went up some stairs.

Another staircase now, a winding one that led off a closetlike doorway; the servants' staircase, probably. CB remembered seeing things like that in BBC shows like "Upstairs, Downstairs." A landing now, a small room.

A little girl sat playing the clarinet. A succession of extremely bizarre noises was issuing from the instrument.

CB said, "Sounds pretty grody to me."

The girl said, "Like, who're you? What are you doing in my room, anyways?"

He said, "Well I, like, heard this weird music and I just followed it here. My name's Chris, but people call me CB. I'm from—"

"California, and you wonder how I can tell." She giggled and shrugged back her curly blond hair, and tugged at a loose strand in her neon pink sweater.

"You're pretty foxy," CB said. "Like, what's your name?"

"I'm Nadia Tedescu."

"Whew! Are you Romanian?"

"What do you think?" she laughed. "My dad works for the ambassador. We're live-in staff. I go

to McLean Junior High. You will too. You're one of the new Joneses, right? Dad told me to look out for you. He said that Californians are precocious." "Hey."

She went on, "I guess I'll see you in school." "School?" It hadn't occurred to him, after all he'd been through, that he would have to go. He was getting pretty disenchanted with freedom already, after only a couple of hours of it. "I didn't have to go to school for a whole year. We just went out and fought lizards. We even went to Japan in a skyfighter. It was totally awesome."

"Is that some kind of a line?" Nadia said, laughing. He could tell she was

impressed, though.

He said, “And what was that weird noise you were making?”

“That?” She put down her clarinet. “It’s

whatchamacallit’s, I mean Loukas Stourmwitch’s *Galactic Symphony*. We’re playing it in the youth orchestra. You know? The new shopping mall? Galactic brotherhood and all that? I know, it’s bullshit, but I don’t care; I’ve lived in a diplomat’s house all my life. Ambassador Andrescu’s almost like a father to me. He lost all his own kids, you know.”

“Lizards?”

“No. Russians, I think. He won’t talk about it, but my dad knows all about it.”

“But that stuff you’re playing *sounds* horrible.”

“It’s just modern, that’s all. Why don’t you come along to our rehearsal tomorrow? It’s really neat, and you can meet some other kids, and maybe we could go to the mall.”

“Sure,” CB said. “But only because you’re so foxy.”

The girl giggled again. CB missed having friends his own age. They chatted for a long time. It was only after he’d gone back to bed that CB wondered what was wrong with her eyes. The girl had a beautiful face, but her eyes just stared ahead, not looking at you.

Probably just a typical airhead facial expression, he told himself as he lay down on the sofa, in front of the television. Matt and Tomoko had already fallen fast asleep, and the blue ninja had gone home with Dr. Schwabauer and Setsuko.

Freedom wasn’t so bad, even if it meant school again. There was that girl to think of, and he’d be making other friends.

He hadn’t felt so safe in a long, long time.

PART 3

SYMPHONY OF TERROR

Chapter 18

When Dingwall reached his Alexandria home, he immediately stormed into the basement and began frantically calling headquarters. However, they all seemed busy with the Los Angeles situation, and it was morning before he was able to raise anyone at all. Diana was the first one he reached.

He threw up his arms in frustration as the lizard leader's face appeared in the monitor. "I did the best I could," he said. "They're buying it for the time being ... in fact, I'm some kind of hero, as a matter of fact. Because of my bravery and my willingness to take my diplomatic lumps, we're going to have even more people than I originally anticipated show up at the premiere, it seems. Nevertheless, the presence of your escapees can only mean trouble. Luckily, I know where they are. They're staying at the Romanian ambassador's house, and as it happens I have the place crawling with converts!" He allowed a smug smile to play across his artificial features, and, although Diana's face was frozen into a grimace of implacability, he

knew that she was secretly pleased.

"In fact," he went on, "I even have a little girl convert for the little boy. These humans are very sentimental creatures; I've no doubt that a little love interest, even in one so young, is just the right thing to suck them into our trap."

Diana said, "Well, I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. You'll have your little invasion, and you'll capture my resistance fighters for me, and you'll have your promotion; while Medea can languish while her tongue grows back."

"Her tongue?" Dingwall was almost convulsed with laughter.

"Yes, it seems that it was sliced off in a recent fracas with the resistance. I know I shouldn't laugh over it, but she does deserve it, considering how she's allowed the pleasures of this planet's cuisine to go to her head ... or should I say her abdomen? You should have seen the blood and venom dripping from her tongue! It was hilarious."

"Alas, my incognito pose does not allow me to enjoy such spectacles," Dingwall sighed, as he removed a small water-vole from a bell jar by its tail and proceeded

to consume it thoughtfully. “You really are so much luckier than I in your position.”

“Well, . . .” said Diana, idly preening herself.

He scrounged around in the bell jar, trying to catch another creature. His hands fastened around a mink, which he pulled out. It nipped at his hand, but he didn’t mind. “I love the texture of minks. I love the way the fur tickles the throat.” He started to chomp down on the creature now, severing its jugular with the first bite. “Ah . . . but still and all it’s nothing like a young human being. Knowing that the human possesses a shred of intelligence, that it can actually think and feel and is profoundly discomfited by one’s devouring of it, adds immeasurably to its flavor, doesn’t it? And there’s a subtle aftertaste. Like their culture—raucous, undisciplined and primitive though it is—ah, their culture—”

“Come on, Dingwall. I really do think you allow your perverse love of these natives’ culture to go too far.”

“Maybe so,” Dingwall said. “But then I always did like playing with my food.”

Medea did not much enjoy the ministrations of the lackey who was painting her ravaged tongue with an astringent tincture.

“And no food for at least two days,” the nurse said, as she applied the burning mixture with a cotton swab around which she had wrapped her own, gloriously lengthy tongue. “It will have all grown back by then, I’m sure.”

She looked out over the sun deck of the Phoenix Hilton, fretting and yelping as they held her down. If only there were more time! She wanted to be present to lead the charge that weekend, to have at least some share in the glory; or else Diana would surely crush her utterly.

“At least I can have a little liquid sustenance, surely,” Medea whined, and the nurse brought her a small chalice full of human blood, which she quaffed greedily.

Revenge! she thought bitterly, remembering the times when she had held power and had exercised it mercilessly, as a good reptile should.

The blue ninja had disappeared once more. Tomoko knew that he must be off in

the papinium tunnels, trying to glean more information about what it was that the lizards had planned. She wished she knew where to find him in this strange town. But meanwhile, sitting over a hot breakfast in the capacious dining room of the Andrescu mansion, conversing with the Bela Lugosi-like ambassador and with Matt and her old friends Schwabauer and Setsuko, she did not feel as though the war was touching them at all. How could they be at war, when they were sitting at so elegant a table, being served so many varieties of food by the attentive Tedescu?

The ambassador was talking about the legend of ***nosferatu***. “It’s really somewhat different from those films, you know,” he said. “For example, did you know that vampires are capable of turning into fine mists, and going through ladies’ keyholes? I suspect Dr. Freud would have had a lot to say about that, ***da?*** But truly, I have come to feel that the saurians have come to stand, in the popular consciousness, for what our ***nosferatu*** used to represent.”

CB said, “Creepy.”

Setsuko said, “Perhaps I should look at your papinium sample now, Christopher.”

The boy plucked it from his ear and tossed it over the platter of hash browns in the middle of the table.

Setsuko examined it thoughtfully and said, “I see now why they were so anxious to prevent you from bringing this sample to the attention of scientists.” “Why?” Tomoko asked her.

“It is not the normal papinium ... it appears to be a different isotope.” She pulled a small instrument out of the ***obi*** of her geisha’s costume. She held it over the papinium sample; Tomoko heard it clicking, and saw a digital readout on a small LCD panel.

“Radical!” CB said. “She carries a geiger counter in her ***obi!***”

“In being both a geisha and a scientist, I am forced to make compromises in both directions,” Setsuko said, bowing. “And what is it your American boy scouts say? ‘Be prepared’?” She continued her measurements as the others ate in silence. “Just as I thought; this is papinium-2010. It has two more neutrons than ___”

“But what does that -mean?”

“I don’t know yet. But I think that we can discover some way of making it useful. Thank you so much, Matt Jones, Tomoko-san, and CB-chan, for making it possible.”

“Can I go and talk to Nadia now?” CB said. “Sure,” Tomoko said. As he sprang up, she whispered to him, “Don’t do anything Matt wouldn’t do.”

He laughed and sprinted upstairs.

They continued their breakfast for a while, and

Andrescu talked some more about vampires. Then they talked about the opening of the new shopping mall, which was scheduled for next Saturday.

“It’s a pretty big deal,” Setsuko was saying. “They are saying that it heralds a new era of economic prosperity, and that it shows that the free states are ready for reconstruction . . . that we **can** live with the lizards.”

“I can’t believe it.” Matt swallowed half a cup of coffee. “We’ve come so far and fought so much, only to find you guys compromising with the aliens!”

“It’s not the way you think,” Andrescu said. “True, there’s been some saurian technology applied to the new mall, but . . . well, I don’t believe that any lizards have tried to exert control over us through it. They seem happy with what parts of the world they control. I, for one, will be happy to go to the opening, and to have my ears stretched by the alien music that our heroic young conductor will perform.”

“I’m suspicious,” Matt said.

Tomoko said, “Don’t, Matt. We’ve got to shore up our strength. They’re not going to be held off forever . . . especially not by treaties. Look at what the Americans did to the Indians ... or the Nazis to Poland. We should keep cool, and we should plan. Fighting doesn’t always work.”

“Oh hell, I guess you’re right,” Matt said.

Just then CB and the butler’s daughter, clarinet case under her arm, bounded into

the room. How cute they looked together, Tomoko thought. Well, he was getting to that age. What was adolescence going to be like for a kid who had already grown up too fast in some ways?

CB said, “Mr. Tedescu says he’s gonna drop us off at the Alden Theater. I thought I’d go along and see Nadia rehearsing.”

“Sure,” said Tomoko. “But don’t offend Mr. Tedescu. Okay?”

“No way, definitely not,” said CB. “Hey, I can’t wait to meet this Dingwall dude. He sounds really weird!”

And he ran off; Tomoko heard a car starting outside.

“Wait a minute. Come back!” Matt shouted suddenly.

“What’s the matter with you?” Tomoko said.

He said, “That name . . . Dingwall . . . where have we heard it before?”

The ambassador said, “Ah, did I not say it before? That is the name of the brave young conductor, the man who parleyed with the lizards.” “There can’t be two Dingwalls,” Matt said. “Stop that car, somebody!”

Tomoko remembered suddenly—

Of course! Standing outside the cavern mouth that led into the papinium labyrinth, she had heard the name Dingwall mentioned . . . Dingwall’s plan was what they’d been discussing! CB was about to meet one of the deadliest members of the secret alien hierarchy!

“We’ve got to stop him!”

“But surely he is a good man, on our side . . .” said the ambassador. But he saw the look in Tomoko’s eye, and something convinced him. “In my own house,” he whispered angrily. “Treachery . . . treachery! It is evil, I tell you—”

“No time for that,” Matt said, springing up. “Do you have another car?”

“No. But the theater is five miles away.”

“I’m getting my running shoes,” Matt said, and dashed upstairs to fetch them as Tomoko, Schwabauer, and Setsuko stared at each other in consternation.

Chapter 19

As CB walked into the theater with Nadia, he saw the conductor—still improbably attired in a tuxedo, though his crimson bowtie had been replaced by a turquoise one—waving his baton furiously. Strange sounds assailed his ears: whinings, scratchings, moanings, percussive tinklings. “It’s kind of like a science fiction movie,” Nadia told him.

“Sounds more like horror to me,” CB said. “Like maybe the soundtrack to *Friday the Thirteenth* or something.”

“You get movies out in lizardland?”

“Hey, you think we’re uncivilized or something?” Then he admitted, “Matt has a videotape machine. We found an abandoned tape library once. The movie industry in L.A.’s pretty much shot . . . except for, like, those gross-o-rama lizard propaganda movies. And definitely no Godzilla movies! They catch you with one, it’s totally instant karma.”

“Wow,” Nadia said, as she unpacked her clarinet

and started to snake and sidle through the orchestra to reach her seat.

CB sat in the auditorium for a while; he was getting bored pretty quickly, though. This music didn’t seem to make much sense. There was one part where the violinists were scraping the wood of their bows across the strings, another part where the wind players were blowing in the wrong end of their instruments or hitting them with xylophone mallets.

It sounded okay, but it wasn’t what you’d call New Wave.

He decided to leave the auditorium and go exploring.

He skipped up the steps onto the stage and slipped past the flats. Backstage there were control panels and other things hanging in the flies, clouds and stuff. They must have been doing a play. A stage throne leaned against the wall. He sat on it. It had what looked like buttons in its arms, the sort of thing you might find in an airplane seat to make it lean back. He wondered what would happen if he pushed

one in and—

Too late!

The throne was tilting, turning—

And he was sealed in a room ... a bare closet of a room without any doors or windows! How had he gotten in? Where was the throne?

He started banging against the walls.

He could hear the music clearly—so clearly that he knew it must be close. It was coming from overhead. He had to be beneath the stage floor, then, behind the orchestra pit.

“Let me outa here!” he screamed.

He pounded for several moments. He tried some of his most powerful karate chops, but they were useless. But there had to be some kind of lever, some kind of control switch, somewhere . . . but where? The walls seemed completely featureless, gray, metallic.

After a brief while the music (if you could call it that) ceased, and the sounds became more random. They must be on break, CB decided. He started pounding louder.

A voice: cold, iron-edged, robotlike. “Don’t try to escape, my little resistance fighter! It’s the end of the road for you.”

A face appeared projected on the wall in front of him. It was that conductor! He glowered. His eyes were crimson and seemed to bum.

“Lemme out of here, you jerk!”

“Ha, ha, ha. Don’t make me laugh. You’ve given us plenty of trouble already, but you won’t anymore. Not after tonight. By the way, would you care to dine with me tonight? Dinner’s on me. Bring your own booze. Ha, ha, ha!”

The face vanished.

Jesus ... it had happened to his Mom and Dad, and now it was going to happen to him ... all he could think of was the horrifying vision of his mother being torn apart and eaten.

And what about Matt and Tomoko? How could he warn them? He was going to die on a lizard's dining-room table, and he couldn't even tell them where he was

* * *

Dingwall returned to his rehearsal just in time. One down, he thought, and two to go! Or four . . . he might as well count in that meddlesome Schwabauer and his friend Setsuko, who might actually figure out a way of hurting him if she were allowed to continue living.

And what about the man in the blue suit whom he'd seen with them? The material of the ninja outfit had looked suspiciously like papinium!

Impossible.

Only a Visitor would need papinium protection here. And only one who did not have the benefit of the antidote, stolen or otherwise.

A Visitor with no antidote would have to be a renegade.

There were no Visitor renegades. Fifth columnists, yes; but they were all identified and in many cases were unwitting double agents for the true cause, what with the miniaturized electronic bugs that had been planted on them by the ever-vigilant espionage teams.

There'd never been a Visitor renegade except one, and that one was very, very dead.

Still, if Fieh Chan or Kenzo Sugihara or whatever he was calling himself this week was still at large, that was yet another person he had to hunt down and kill.

His mood of elation was rapidly changing to one of depression. All this petty drudgery to think of, he mused, when the great plan was about to bear fruit.

At that moment Matt Jones burst into the theater and rushed toward the podium

where Dingwall was standing. The fellow was cursing and screaming imprecations. Doubtless he knew something.

“I want my boy, do you hear?” Matt shouted. He came up to Dingwall, seized him by the shoulder, and began to shake him. “What have you done to my kid, you lizard scum?”

“Wait a minute. I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dingwall stated in the most pacific-sounding tones he could muster. “Your boy? What boy . . . whoa, you’re the famous Matt Jones, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Matt said, momentarily disarmed.

“I’m glad we’ve met at last, after the chaos of yesterday. We freedom fighters should become acquainted with one another, shouldn’t we?”

Matt looked at him dubiously and began searching through the rows of children, who all stared curiously at this wild-eyed man storming through their ranks.

Finally he spotted Nadia and pulled her out. “Where is he?” he shouted. “Where’s CB?” Dingwall looked coolly in the young girl’s face. He transfixed her with his gaze, and began to broadcast the mental patterns that would awaken her conditioning.

The girl said, “Matt, CB never came with me. We got to the car, but he decided he didn’t want to come after all. Something about the music not being New Wave enough? He said he wanted to explore the house some more.”

Dingwall turned to Matt with an I-told-you-so sort of shrug.

The kids all crowded around him, pressing for his autograph. Dingwall was pleased with how all the conversions were going; he’d been working on them in groups of two or three all week under the guise of giving them individual attention in his home. How easily the parents had been taken in!

“You’re quite a celebrity,” Dingwall said smoothly. “Everyone seems to have heard of your Tokyo caper last year.”

He could see Matt’s confusion. How gullible these humans were! A little flattery, a little mild deception, and—

“There’s something fishy about all this,” Matt said. “I’d better phone the ambassador’s house.” “Ah, the telephone service around here has been most irregular since the troubles began, I’m afraid,” Dingwall said. “I don’t think any of the ones here work properly . . . the nearest working one is at the 7-11 store down the road.”

Matt looked around. The kids were still jamming around him, clamoring for his views and for a ninjitsu demonstration. It was wonderful, Dingwall thought, to hide under the putative innocence of children . . . especially when they were all converts, all in his power. Telepathically, he commanded them to act as cloyingly cute as they could, knowing that this would disable the poor man’s ability to think straight.

“I still think he’s here somewhere,” Matt said suspiciously.

“Maybe he did come here,” Dingwall said, chuckling inwardly as he tried to maintain his human expression of serene composure. “Children,

help Mr. Jones look for his boy, will you?”

The children separated and began to run gleefully around the auditorium and hallways. The chaos was astonishing. In the confusion, Dingwall slipped behind one of the stage flats, slid down a trapdoor, and disappeared. He found the underground passageway that led to CB’s prison, murmured a few code words for its cybernetically controlled doorway, grabbed the boy from behind—the odor of fresh meat was so overpowering that he wanted to bite into the child’s tender muscle tissue immediately as the creature struggled and bit—muttering a few more code words, Dingwall conveyed the boy down a deep tunnel into a storeroom that opened out onto the papinium labyrinth itself, and then began to gag him and tie him up, all the while humming a melodic fragment from the *Galactic Symphony*. Then he swiftly went back up by another back way and returned to the auditorium. “Ah, there you are, Matt,” he said affably. “I had to go to the bathroom, I’m afraid. Ah, look, there’s Tedescu. Perhaps he knows where the boy is. What a nuisance those young charges can be, eh? I have over forty of them to contend with, but at least it’s only once a week.”

Tedescu ran up to them, huffing.

“Ah, *Domnul* Jones, your boy, your boy—” “Where is he?” Matt shouted.

“I just saw him—” Tedescu looked into Dingwall’s eyes for clues. Dingwall provided them by means of the conditioning. “I saw him running outside ... by the woods . . . worry about him,

being chased maybe, I don’t know, Visitors.”

Matt hurried after him.

When he had gone, Dingwall bellowed with laughter.

Chapter 20

Darkness. Complete silence. He could hear his own heart beating: thump, thump, thump . . . just like the soundtrack of a mad slasher movie. He couldn't move. Where was he? It wasn't the same place where that conductor guy had dragged him and tied in up. No. Someone had come in earlier and given him an injection. He'd resisted, but it hurt too much. The drug burned his arm. He wondered what it was ... he couldn't think straight. Why was he here? The last thing he'd known was the auditorium, but—

The music: that had stopped.

He tried to talk but couldn't. He was still gagged, then.

He tried shifting his body. He wasn't exactly tied hand and foot, but there were restraints on his arms and legs. He seemed to be chained to a wall. Cold. Metallic. He must be somewhere in the papinium labyrinth . . . which meant he could be anywhere at all, anywhere from Alexandria to Raleigh.

He had to see—

He strained. Dark. Dark. He tried to widen his pupils, but it was too great a strain. Probably that drug. Whatever it was.

He tried to scream. The gag was choking him. He couldn't breathe. He had to have help.

The free zone! What a joke, he thought.

He thought about all they'd done, all they'd given up . . . and here he was in a lizard prison. He was going to get eaten after all. It was all so useless. He wanted to cry, but that was for babies. He waited. Time passed, agonizingly slowly.

A noise.

CB looked up; he still couldn't see anything. And then, a small hand fiddling with his gag. A light. The soft skin of a young girl against his face—

“Nadia!” he stuttered.

“I’ve brought you milk and cookies.”

“Like, where is this anyway? You’re one of **them**, aren’t you? A convert. Get out of here, I just want to be alone.”

“You can’t fight them, you know,” Nadia said softly. An infinite sadness seemed to emanate from her.

“I can get us out of here,” CB said, “if only you’ll help. Jesus, I’m a human being, and you’ve been hypnotized by him . . .”

A small patch of light. There was an opening. A faint blue glow from outside. It was very cold. As he looked around he could see other kids, too—all of them tied up or chained to the wall. “Feeding time, I guess,” CB said bitterly. “You’re fattening us up for the pot, huh? I feel like I’m in the middle

of Hansel and Gretel or something.”

Nadia burst into tears.

“Come on now, you don’t have feelings. Man, I’ve seen converts. They’re zombies. When you fight them they just keep coming and coming. They don’t feel pain, they don’t even feel any pleasure in hurting you, they’re total brainwipes, you know? If you’re crying, it’s only because you’ve been ordered to. I know about you converted dudes.”

She didn’t answer him, but stuffed something into his mouth: a chocolate chip cookie. Then she started pouring a glass of milk down his throat. “I can feed myself,” CB said, “if you untie me!”

If only he could get just one hand free, he thought he could jimmy the rest of it. Nadia moved on to the other captives. He shouted after her, “You’re a traitor, you know that? Do you know what they’ll do to you when you’re no more use to them? They’ll eat you, that’s what! And there’s nothing you’ll be able to do about it . . . you’ll be helpless. Shit, if they tell you to enjoy yourself while you’re being sliced into sushi, you’ll enjoy yourself —brainwipe.”

He looked across at the others, his eyes growing accustomed to the darkness. They were all tied up next to each other; CB could almost reach the next victim, if he could only stretch a little more. Nadia was still whimpering softly to

herself. What if the conditioning hadn't entirely taken? Was there a way of talking her out of it?

CB racked his brains. The father—he had to be one of them, too, now that he remembered the butler with his shifty, glassy-eyed gaze. Did Nadia have a mother? He said, “Nadia . . . Nadia, where’s your mother?”

“My mother . . . my . . . Something was happening to her now. He could tell that he had hit on some vital image, some bug in the Visitor’s programming. Had they eaten her mother, too? His mind flashed swiftly back to the time he had seen ... no! he thought, fighting the pain of the memory of his old family life.

“Think of your mother,” CB said urgently. “Mother ... yes ... I can’t think of her, the image is blank, it’s blank and there’s a monster standing there now standing there and opening its jaws and there’s blood dripping—”

The conditioning!

Slowly, steadily, CB repeated over and over, “It’s the conversion process . . . conversion is like a computer program, you see, they’ve keyed you in to react to certain passwords and images, but you’re not a computer, you’re a person, your brain is much more complicated than those lizards think, and they think we’re pretty stupid and it never occurs to them we can fight back. You’ve got your own consciousness under all that, like, you can reach out and click on a new program. It’s like they put this thing into your mind and you think you can only emulate a terminal, and you have to run whatever they input into you, but you’re not just a terminal, you can control your own mind, you’re in control, you’re in control—”

“No, no, no,” Nadia screamed.

“Think of your mother!” CB whispered harshly.

Suddenly Nadia burst into a string of Romanian mixed with English and with nonsense syllables: “Mommy please run away they’re after you mommy mommy where are they *Doamne ajutal ce sa fac?* I think they’re gonna kill you —”

That was it—the central trauma of her conditioning—CB knew that at the center of every conversion process they planted a terrifying image, one that would keep the victim in line and scare him half to death if he tried to disobey. He knew that

Nadia's mother must have died horribly, that perhaps she had been the only witness to her death; that would have increased the guilt and Dingwall's hold on her. But maybe she could be pulled out. Over and over, he told her to remember her mother while she sobbed and wailed.

Was she coming to? "Let me go," he whispered. She snapped to attention now, her eyes glazing over. "I can't."

"Be strong. Let me go. Don't be afraid because of what happened to your mother. It's never gonna happen to you. 'Cause we're gonna fight them, we're gonna drive them right back to the stars." She was weakening now. CB said, "Look into my eyes. I'm a human. I'm not a lizard. I'm a human like your mother. And you're gonna kill me if you don't let me go."

Numbly, Nadia came toward him. She said, "I don't know how to break these chains . . . they're made of that super metal "Think! You must've seen **him** do it!"

"Some kind of password, the central computer listens, understands."

"He must've said it in front of you a hundred times. They really think we're stupid. Especially converted dudes. They give away all kinds of secrets all the time—"

"OPEN SESAME!" Nadia screamed.

"Give me a break!" CB said.

Suddenly his chains snapped loose. So did all the others'. "Ho-l-ee shit!" CB said. "That's the dumbest secret password I ever heard."

Nadia said, her eyes still streaming with tears, "He thinks it's . . . real exotic, you know . . . ancient earth myths and all . . . he's really into primitive cultures, I overheard him talking to Diana on the monitor once."

"Well, let's get out of here."

The other kids gathered around them. They all seemed cowed, expressionless. Many of them didn't look as if they wanted to escape at all. CB noticed suddenly that most of them couldn't walk . . . that they had had arms and legs hacked off.

Suddenly he knew what kind of a place this really was. “Jesus God,” he whispered, “dinner on the hoof.” These people would never make it out of wherever they were. It was a struggle for some of them to crawl. Their faces were ashen, lifeless. “We’ll have to come back for you.” CB wondered how he was going to do that, how he was ever going to find this terrible place again.

Seizing Nadia’s hand, he started to drag her from the room. He put his hands over her eyes, even though he knew she had seen the sight already, so many times, she was probably inured to it by now. But he didn’t want her to see it again. Not now, when she was slowly drifting back into the real world from the horrific nightmare of conversion.

“Show me the way,” he said. “Quick!”

Tunnels, passageways. They turned and turned again, CB’s mind working overtime to remember the way in case they had to come back to get the others.

Left, left, left, right ... he struggled to retain the information in his mind. But he knew he was going to be lost, lost without Nadia.

They continued to run down the dim tunnels. In the meager light that reflected off the blue walls, he could see that Nadia’s eyes were beginning to glow again, that she was falling back into the trap of conversion.

“Where are you taking me, Nadia?” he said.

There were some stairs now, and a wooden door. She flung it open and they were in some kind of basement, in a townhouse maybe. He looked around. “Where is this, Nadia?” he demanded.

She said, stammering, “I’m sorry, CB. I couldn’t help myself . . . the conditioning . . . it’s back now, full force, maybe stronger than before

They heard footsteps.

And CB was looking into the end of a laser blaster.

“Don’t move or you’ll be dead.”

He looked up.

A smile slowly formed on the lips of Dingwall, conductor and Visitor saboteur.

“CB, I swear, I couldn’t control myself, I tried to think of Mom like you said but it was too strong for me—”

She stopped speaking abruptly and crumpled to the floor.

Dingwall had turned his blaster on her. She was dead. “Useless little bitch!” he muttered.

“Aren’t you going to kill me too?”

“No. You are too useful a bargaining chip for me. I need you, boy, at least for a while ... to placate Diana! Oh, we will dine on your young flesh together, the supreme commander and I, and I will be raised up.”

CB was too numbed to answer. He just stood there, like a statue. He tried to think of some of the moves Matt had taught him, but there wasn’t any style of martial arts that would work against a laser blaster. He was absolutely certain of that.

Dingwall slowly peeled away his face and tossed it over a chair, chuckling softly to himself.

Chapter 21

Matt dashed back into the house. *It's my fault*, he was thinking, *I should have watched him more carefully, now I don't know where he's gone . . .* Tomoko and the others were waiting for him, still seated at the breakfast table in consternation. Tedescu's elegantly prepared platters lay untouched on the table, getting cold.

When they saw that he didn't have CB with him, they all started talking at once.

"Maybe he's just off somewhere, in the manner of all mischievous young lads," the ambassador said without much enthusiasm. Matt could tell that Andrescu really didn't think so, though.

They sat around listlessly for a long while.

At last Setsuko said to Dr. Schwabauer, "I suppose I should take this papinium-2010 sample for some tests."

"Tests?" Matt said.

"Yes. My cousin Yogami-san has allowed me to establish a small laboratory in his basement, and I think I can do more there than with the few

instruments I happen to have carried here in my obi," said Setsuko.

She and Schwabauer got up to leave.

Matt banged his fists on the table. "I wish I'd never come here," he shouted. "I don't know where the kid is, maybe he's dead—"

Tedescu said, "We'll find him, sir. Trust me."

Why didn't he trust the man? Something about his eyes

Back in the laboratory, Schwabauer watched anxiously as Setsuko poured reagents into flasks and filtered them and chilled them and whirled them about in a centrifuge. He had no idea what was going on, but the image of the richly-garbed, fine-featured Japanese geisha delicately working with the most high-tech

apparatus was fascinating to watch. There was a kind of beauty in the incongruity of it.

“What are you doing now?” he said.

She lifted up an Ehrlenmeyer flask and held it to the light. “These are bacterial cultures,” she said. “Just a hunch. Actually, I have been stealing a leaf from the aliens’ superior science, and I’ve been working on some fancy bioengineering.”

“Ja?” You mean, recombinant DNA, something like that?”

“In a way.” She poured two mixtures together, a clear blue one and a cloudy red one. It looked like magic to him. The liquids seethed as they reacted, and then the solution went clear. “Ha! I may be on to something.”

“But what is it you are looking for?”

“Well . . . the bacteria on which the red dust is based are rather fascinating organisms. You see, their red color derives from a ferric ion which is the central atom of this vast pigment molecule. Now what I’m doing is—using a growth accelerating device invented by the Visitors—I’m replicating and simultaneously mutating the bacterium at a rate of about ten thousand generations per minute, in a papinium-rich environment. I’m actually producing a papinium-fixing bacterium which will—” “Ah, I understand! This ultraspeed-multiplying bacterium will actually absorb papinium and render it inactive, destroying the molecular web which keeps out the red dust?”

“You’re not so stupid, Professor Schwabauer . . . for a liberal arts man!” said Setsuko, laughing gently. “Oh, look! I think I may have something here!”

Schwabauer watched in awe as the various solutions continued to seethe and froth. He could detect no change at all in the flasks, but all at once a number of LCDs on machines in the lab began flashing, computers began chiming, and a robotlike voice began to repeat. “We have achieved congruency with the project model. Now commencing procedure for isolating target bacterium.”

“Isn’t technology grand?” Setsuko said, beaming. Only one thing clouded Schwabauer’s elation: they had heard no word about the missing boy, and he found it hard to believe in anything but foul play.

And they still hadn't been able to piece together the aliens' plans.

Why was the papinium factor so important?

A forcefield held CB fast. Dingwall paced up and down, lecturing him. He could barely wait to feast on the child; as a martial arts practitioner, the boy had splendid muscle tone and would be particularly good very rare, with just a hint of seasoning. But he'd promised Diana to save him for a mutual orgy of gluttony, so he couldn't indulge himself yet.

Besides, it would be fun to convert him first.

Make him actually *want* to be eaten in the service of the Visitors!

He said, "Before I turn you into a mass of quivering, mindless jelly, I might as well tell you my plans. That's the custom among you Earth people, isn't it? Before the hero's untimely demise, it is appropriate for the villain to give a speech about what is going to happen, no?"

"You've been watching too many bad movies," CB managed to blurt out despite the pain.

The body of the girl he had recently lasered lay sprawled across the coffee table in the basement. Now and then, Dingwall paused to flick off some bloodflecks with his tongue. It was good not to wear that ape mask; it was good to feel saurian again.

"Bad movies, eh?" he said. "Yes; I am proud to say that I have made a long and detailed study of your frivolous, primitive culture. But yes, the dramatic revelations. Did you know that the papinium tunnels conjoin in a huge node near here, and that

Symphony of Terror

they surface in the vicinity of a small suburb named Spring Oaks, where a brand new shopping mall is being dedicated in a few hours' time? That a vast new computer for controlling the papinium tanks has been installed right inside the shopping mall, disguised as a—ha, ha, ha—kiddies' merry-go-round? Imagine the consternation when the tanks start bursting up from their underground installation—tanks totally immune to the red dust —ready to wreak mayhem on

this unfortunate city!

“Imagine the surprise of the distinguished guests when they find out it’s not a shopping mall at all! No—it is the future headquarters of the northeastern command post—of which I shall be commander!”

“You’ll command in hell when Matt gets through with you, you ugly snake,” CB said.

“What spirit the creature shows! I imagine you’ve watched a lobster being lowered into a pot of boiling water? You show just the same kind of spirit. Go ahead, wave your antennae, wiggle your pincers. Ha, ha, ha.”

CB tried to spit at him, but the forcefield blocked the way, and the spit flew back in his face. Dingwall guffawed heartily.

At that moment there was a beep, and he was forced to pay attention to the calls waiting on his communications console. The first was from Diana.

“Everything looks good, commander,” he said.

She smiled. “I trust you’ll deliver the goods.”

“Look behind me!” Dingwall said. “Part of our dinner is already trussed up and waiting.”

Diana disappeared from the screen.

Next he spoke to his lieutenants, giving some instructions as to the proper placement of the forces and the tanks.

There was one final call he had to answer. He was most irritated to find that it was Medea.

“You again!” he said. “I thought you’d been temporarily put out of commission by a splitting tongue.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” Medea said, pouting. “Pm coming in this evening. I don’t intend to be left out of your assault. Pm coming in by skyfighter, and Pll be arriving at the usual rendezvous point in about half an hour. I trust you’ll be

there to pick me up and bring me in?”

What a nuisance, Dingwall thought. Now he would have to delay the torture and conversion of the boy. Medea always had a habit of putting a damper on things. He would have to drive down to the secret rendezvous, which was located in Lorton, an area which had once been a prison. “I trust you have a supply of antitoxin?” he said, hoping to discourage her. He didn’t want to give up any part of his own hoard. It had been dwindling steadily, and he still had work to do.

“Yes,” she said. “I do have a few ampules of the pilfered antitoxin—enough for my purposes anyway.”

“Very well,” he sighed.

He looked at the clock hanging on the wall, which told time in comfortably familiar alien hieroglyphics; converting it to earth time in his head, he noted with dismay that he would no longer have time for converting the boy until after the big event.

That hideous Medea! But she was still nominally his commander, and he must observe the forms of the Visitor hierarchy ... at least for now.

“I’ll catch you later!” he said to the boy, reaching for his human mask and pulling it over his head; he shivered as it bonded to his skin.

Then he stalked out.

A shadowy figure slipped into the basement.

A hand moved over the command console.

Startled, CB fell out of his force-shield induced stasis. He rubbed himself. He’d been bruised, but he wasn’t badly hurt yet. He looked around. “Wait! Who set me free?” he said.

He was standing in front of the boy now: a ninja dressed in dark, metallic blue.

“Kenzo!” said CB.

The ninja put a finger to his lips and beckoned him to follow with a very

Japanese gesture: palm down, fingers wagging.

“We only got a couple hours,” the boy said, “but I heard him say that he’s not coming back here first. He’s gone to get Medea.”

“Do not speak!” said the blue ninja.

Catlike he moved across the room. CB followed. There were basements above basements; they must have been far below ground level. At length they reached what looked like a respectable middle-class living room.

“What do we do, just walk out through the front door?”

“No,” the blue ninja said, “the back door.” They slipped out into the early evening, and the ninja carefully restored the lock he had picked to its untampered-with condition.

Chapter 22

Early evening at the Andrescu mansion. The sun was setting; the ambassador was upstairs getting into some formal wear, making ready for the opening ceremonies at the Spring Oaks Mall.

Matt was pacing despondently in the vestibule when he heard a voice from outside . . . the kid's voice! It had to be!

"Oh, Matt ... oh, Dad, I'm back!"

He flung open the doorway and saw the kid and the blue ninja walking up the gravel driveway. As CB caught sight of Matt, he broke away from the ninja and ran toward his adoptive father. Matt caught him and swung him in the air—and saw the bruises on his face and through the windows of his tattered clothing. "You look like shit, Christopher." "I've been through shit, Matt. But, like, it's casual now." He beamed.

Matt called upstairs: "Tomoko, he's home!"

A car pulled into the driveway and Professor Schwabauer and Setsuko stepped out. Setsuko ran up to the ninja and embraced him joyfully, crying,

"Anata ga watashi o nakasemashita no .. . ai shite imasu no de. . . ."

"What are they talking about?" CB said.

The blue ninja said: "Alas, she is telling me that I made her weep, that she loves me. That cannot be. The one she once loved died in an explosion at Osaka Castle more than a year ago. All things are transient, Setchan," he said, calling her by a nickname of endearment. "Both the Zen philosophy and the Ritual of Zon teach us the same thing." "How can I accept your death," Setsuko said, "when you stand here before me?"

"There is a terrible battle to come."

CB spoke up. "It looks bad, you guys, real bad. They're gonna invade through the new shopping mall—it's really a secret lizard installation—and then they're

gonna capture all the distinguished guests.”

“So much for the brotherhood of man and alien!” Matt said. “We’d better warn the ambassador.”

“No need,” Andrescu said, stepping forth from the front door of the mansion with Tedescu in tow and Tomoko following close behind. Tomoko was overjoyed to see that the kid was back and that they were all gathered together in one place. The ambassador went on, “I do not intend to sit around like a sheep while my friends battle the evil that is about to beset us.”

They went inside and sat down in the living room: a small, intense group. ***We’re all resistance fighters***, thought Matt. ***Ambassadors and geisha girls, butlers and kids. This whole thing may bring humanity together yet.***

Weak from his imprisonment, CB started to explain everything he knew about Dingwall’s plans. The blue ninja interrupted now and then to comment on things that he had discovered in his clandestine explorations of the papinium labyrinth.

“They have an entire underground nation of slaves,” he said, “who are kept in subterranean pens and have been toiling to expand the labyrinth for months. They work them to death and then mince them into hamburger ... a fiendishly efficient procedure!”

Setsuko stood up now, brandishing a petri dish full of what looked like a quivering mass of metallic blue jello. She said, “Then it’s fortunate that I have been able to synthesize this bacterium in time!” She waved at the blue ninja to be careful. “I won’t open this petri dish now, or my ninja friend will die horribly, I’m afraid. This is a culture of papinium-fixing bacteria that I’ve created with the help of the aliens’ own technology, a machine that someone was able to salvage from that terrible Florida Project.”

“What does it do?” Matt said. “It doesn’t seem possible that a small dish of Jell-O could destroy an entire lizard invasion!”

“Please trust me,” Setsuko said. “I am a scientist, and occasionally I am able to see vast possibilities in little things. Who would have thought that the atom bomb that once destroyed Hiroshima

could have been powered by the release of energy from a piece of uranium no

bigger than a dime?” “Why, that’s true,” Professor Schwabauer said. “Very perceptive of you.”

“Well, we needn’t throw bombs at the papinium-coated tanks. We just have to throw this blue jello at them. A tiny bit will do. The presence of papinium will throw the bacteria into a frenzy of multiplication, generation after generation, thousands in seconds. The tight structure of the papinium layer will be dissolved . . . and the omnipresent red dust will be able to seep in and attack any Visitors within.”

“Totally awesome!” CB said.

“I will have my own way of dealing with the ***nosferatu***,” Ambassador Andrescu said enigmatically. “It is according to the traditions of my country. But now I will telephone all my friends, the ones who agreed to attend the opening of the shopping mall ... we must all fight, no? It will be splendid. At last I shall feel that my presence here is justified.”

“We still have a couple of hours,” Matt said. Andrescu left to make phone calls; Setsuko went to bring more petri dishes full of the blue bacteria.

In the flurry of activity, no one noticed that the butler, Tedescu, had slipped away . . . that he had started the car and gone off somewhere.

Tedescu drove like a maniac down the deserted George Washington Parkway. He didn’t notice the Potomac, bordered by trees with russet leaves; he didn’t see the Washington Monument or the Lin-coin Memorial as they rose from the opposite bank of the river, their marble dyed pink by the setting sun.

All he was thinking of was Dingwall . . . Dingwall’s eyes . . . crimson, hypnotic, and the pain of the conversion process.

He had to warn him! He had to warn the master!

The parkway became Washington Street, the main thoroughfare of Old Town. He knew where Dingwall’s townhouse was, because he had been taken there for conversion almost a year before.

He parked in an alleyway and knocked loudly on the back door. He pounded until his fists bled. There was no answer. But he had to warn him. In the back of

his mind the words of his condition echoed and reechoed: ***You will always warn the masters of danger, even if it means your own life. You are nothing. The masters are everything. You are their servant. Obey, obey, obey.***

Where was the master? If he didn't obey the conditioning he'd have to stay by the doorway . . . maybe until he died of hunger. It was all right to die, of course. It was a joyous and honorable thing to die in a master's service. That was so obvious it hardly needed saying.

He continued to beat methodically on the door.

Until he noticed that there was something wrong with the lock. It was crooked. There were scratch marks on it. Someone had broken in! Was the master in danger? If so it was his duty to save him, no matter what the cost.

He started to pry the lock with his fingernails.

Suddenly it gave way and he entered the house.

There'd been a secret room in the basement. That was where the master usually remained.

He went down the stairs.

Turned on the light—

And screamed! A young girl's corpse was lying across a coffee table. Blood was dribbling from a wound in her side, a wound so perfectly shaped it could only have come from a laser blaster—

The corpse of his own daughter!

He fell down beside the body and clasped it in his arms. He wept. Had the masters truly done this? But they'd promised . . . they'd sworn that in exchange for his service, he and his daughter would be safe from their appetites . . . hadn't they sworn it? He'd only done it to save his little Nadia, his one treasure

He buried his face in cold flesh. Hot tears burned his eyes.

To serve the masters—that was his duty—yet, yet—

What was happening to his conditioning?

Soon the ambassador's friends began to pull up in their impressive cars: Sir John Augustine, in his Rolls, was one of the first to arrive. When the situation was explained to him, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully and said, "Good God! Jolly rotten of those lizards, what! When I was a young officer in India, I remember a maharajah who used to—" "No time to be regaled with one of your lovely anecdotes, I'm afraid, John," Andrescu said urgently. "How are you with throwing things?" He showed him one of the petri dishes.

"Oh, I say! We're going to give those papinium tanks a christening they'll never forget," Sir John said grimly. "It'll be like the siege of Bhaktipore all over again!"

"Tedescu!" the ambassador was shouting. "*De unde esti dumneata?* That confounded servant, he is nowhere to be found . .

"Uh oh," CB said. "Did you know Nadia was a convert?"

"Surely not," the ambassador said in alarm, "not in my own house!" But he remembered, suddenly, how strangely Tedescu had acted sometimes. Was it possible that he had gone away to warn the aliens? Was there no limit to man's treachery?

"There's no time for conjecture about one man's possible betrayal," Schwabauer said. "There's no time for anything at all. There is time only for action."

More were beginning to arrive now, including Setsuko's cousin Dr. Yogami. There was the affluent, affable Bill Middendorf, an amateur composer of some stature; there were a couple of superannuated cabinet ministers; there was an ambassador from a central African country, resplendent in his traditional robes.

"Well!" Sir John said jovially, "Do you really think a bunch of tired old codgers like us can fight the most terrifying military machine human beings have ever encountered?"

"They'll be singing another tune by nightfall," Middendorf said grimly. "We'll strike a blow for the free world."

Andrescu saw that many of his friends were stooped with age, and that they were

in no condition to battle aliens. He knew that many of them, the diplomats especially, had been trapped in Washington by the partitioning of America; that they had been sitting around in their splendid mansions, being ferried back and forth to receptions and parties by their chauffeurs, standing helplessly by while their very planet was ravaged by the forces of darkness. He was moved that they wanted to fight, and he drew courage from their bravery.

“We will never surrender,” he said fiercely.

Then he looked at the ones who had only last night been refugees, desperately fleeing across the lawn of the residence. If it hadn’t been for that Dingwall fellow they would be dead already. But Dingwall was an alien, and his reasons for stopping the attack had turned out to be hypocritical ... it was clear that he hadn’t wanted anything to get in the way of his assault on the shopping mall! Was there no end to these reptiles’ perfidy?

But the blue ninja was a reptile too

Andrescu told himself: ***I’m too old to believe in absolute good and absolute evil. I know better. Don’t I? The aliens have been seduced away from the truth by a few power-hungry ones; that is the way with all atrocities.*** He remembered Cambodia ... the Germans . . . the Russian prison camps, to which he had almost been consigned once.

Their group: an alien ninja, a martial arts teacher, two women and a boy . . . and these at the head of a motley crew of ancients with a desperate need to ***mean*** something in the battle to control Earth . . . the green, lush, watery planet that the aliens coveted so.

“Are we ready?” he said.

A ragged yes came in reply.

“Well, let us go, then.” Andrescu waited for Setsuko to distribute the last of the petri dishes, and then they trooped outside to their waiting limousines.

As they stood in the driveway—

A screech of tires. A car had rammed into a tree. The chauffeurs running to see what had happened.

“My car!” Andrescu went to where his car was burning. They were pulling someone out. That person moved still, though his face was charred and his lips blistered.

“Tedescu,” said the ambassador softly. “Were you loyal to me after all?”

The dying man clasped in his hand the hand of a young girl—

Dead. Her body ripped by a laserblast.

CB, running up, cried, “Nadia’s—”

They stood in a circle around the burning car. “Get back!” Andrescu shouted. Unless you want to be killed.”

Tedescu murmured, “I forgot ... my true nature . . . but I found it again . . . they killed my daughter . . .”

Andrescu looked around. He saw the boy’s face contorted with rage. The boy cried out, “But Nadia, we almost made it all the way back from the dungeon . . . you almost made it home.”

Tedescu died.

Andrescu turned and said, “There is one thing I must get.” He stalked back into the house and up the stairs. He pulled open an antique chest—the one where he had kept his wife’s jewels. He threw everything on the floor: jewelry, satin scarves, frilly lace garments caked with dust.

At the bottom of the chest was what he was looking for.

A wooden stake and a mallet.

He took it out and stared at it for a long time, wild with grief. “I will have my own way of dealing with the ***nosferatu***, ” he told himself, repeating what he had said, half in jest, to the assembled others less than an hour before.

He had kept the mallet and the stake for sentimental reasons. Once, remarking on his resemblance to Bela Lugosi, a Hollywood producer visiting Washington had presented him with the two items as souvenirs. They had once been used as

props in an actual vampire movie.

Of course, Andrescu had laughed about it, and had informed the Hollywood producer that not only wasn't he a direct descendant of Vlad Dracul, "The Impaler", but that that worthy was considered something of a national hero in his country.

But maybe wielding them would have some symbolic value, childish as it sounded.

He took both objects, tucking the stake carefully under his arm, and went to join the others.

Chapter 24

Tomoko sat in the back of Dr. Yogami's battered station wagon, next to the alien whom she had thought dead. It was a tight squeeze; they followed the convoy of limousines that wound its way along the meandering, narrow Old Dominion Drive. They didn't speak much. They had been through all this once before, when they had traveled to Osaka Castle to battle Lady Murasaki and her army without souls. She looked into the eyes of the alien who had once told her he loved her. They were distant and unfathomable. The blue papinium-steeped fabric enveloped him utterly. At last she reached out and tried to touch him.

She wondered whether he still loved her.

Matt couldn't help sneaking a glance behind and seeing the two of them. He tried to feel jealousy for the soulful stares that his wife was giving the alien, but he couldn't anymore. She and Matt had been through the ritual of Zon together, and now he **knew** the love for him which she held in her heart . . . even if she herself did not know it. Perhaps they were all going to die soon. He wasn't

angry anymore. He felt, instead, forgiveness. He was at peace.

At last Setsuko whispered something in his ear. "What?" he said.

She said, holding his hand, "I'm afraid for you, Matt. You have in your eyes the look of one who has seen his own destiny."

"I don't know what you mean."

She said, "I understand you, Matt. They love each other, don't they?"

"I think so."

"I was his mistress once. But one day, after his astonishing resurrection, in the small house in Tokyo, when we were making love, I heard him murmur Tomoko's name."

They had speaking in such hushed voices that Matt was sure that Tomoko and the blue ninja had not heard them. Dr. Yogami drove on down the beltway now.

The road was empty. It was not entirely true that commerce and prosperity had been restored to the free states; that was more the pronouncement of politicians and optimists. Beside the beltway the walls that had been put up to protect suburbia from the noise of traffic were broken in many places; some bore the scars of battle. Beside the road there were abandoned cars . . . here a twisted, elephantine mass of wreckage where a dozen cars had not been cleared away.

Setsuko said, "They are so happy to have found each other again. We should not destroy that happiness, should we?"

CB, who was crouching in the very back of the station wagon, pointed at the Spring Oaks exit.

"We're there," he said.

They pulled in and parked beside the other cars. It was kind of incongruous to be next to so many official diplomatic vehicles, but then the war had brought so many incongruous people together, hadn't it?

Ambassador Andrescu strode on ahead, his evening clothes crammed with the sealed petri dishes that contained the still-dormant papinium-fixing bacteria. His stake and mallet were safely tucked in the folded coat that he carried on his arm.

The much-vaunted Spring Oaks shopping mall loomed up ahead, a two-level building of brick and concrete. It was an ugly place; he had imagined it would be more spectacular, but doubtless it was the best that could be done with the free states' fast-dwindling resources. So this was the great symbol of man's return to prosperity, the sign that humans could build on the poisoned gift of lizard technology! He was afraid.

Professor Schwabauer caught up with him.

"Ah, Ambassador," he said. "You are as scared as I am?"

"Very scared." Andrescu smiled wanly, feeling the clink of petri dishes in his pockets as he walked.

"But you and I are old enough to remember many things, hard things."

"Yes," Andrescu thought of the past. He had not been able to save his family.

But now, in his old age, he could do *something*. A supreme irony had brought him from his ancient land to this one —had stranded him amongst strangers and aliens

—had forced him only now to release himself from his grief-haunted past.

They reached the grand gateway, over \Which hung pennants that proclaimed:

WELCOME TO THE

SPRING OAKS SHOPPING MALL

There were many flags hanging from over the entryway, representing the free states of America and many of the countries of the world. But to his chagrin Andrescu saw that there was also a red flag blazoned with the emblem of the Visitors.

“What is that thing doing here?” he asked.

Schwabauer said, “Save your anger for the aliens.”

And they walked into the mall itself.

And CB followed, whispering to Tomoko, “I can’t believe it! The first girl I meet in this so-called ‘free zone,’ and she gets killed by a lizard!”

“We’ll get ’em,” Tomoko said, to mask her trepidation.

“Oh, it’ll be just like the siege of Bhaktipore,” Sir John Augustine was saying as the group walked down the hallway.

Ahead, the sounds of an orchestra tuning up. A confluence of corridors; a sunken pit in which the youth orchestra sat. Perhaps a thousand guests were present, sitting on canvas chairs or on the steps that surrounded the pit.

“Even the old Prez made it,” Sir John remarked to Andrescu, pointing out the smiling face of a former president of the United States.

Andrescu said, “We’d better separate now, and find separate seats. We don’t know where or when the attack will occur.”

“Interesting decor,” someone said from the back.

Sir John looked around. “Metallic blue walls. Pretty.”

“Deadly, you mean!” said Matt. “That happens to be the monomolecular papinium shield that will protect the lizards when they take over the mall. It’ll be impregnable—a fortress. And they can send in more manpower whenever they want, riding the subway through the papinium labyrinth.”

Dingwall and Medea watched the gathering crowd from an upper level. “Look at it all!” Dingwall gloated. “And it will soon be ours.”

Medea said, “Look! A pet store. Perhaps we could—”

“Bah! Your gluttony will always betray you, foolish woman. Do you realize the panic that would ensue if you were to walk downstairs with a puppydog’s tail still trailing from your mouth?”

“There’s no fear of that. I can’t eat solid food for another day or two yet,” she said, “although my tongue is growing back very nicely. But a nice aperitif of chilled, slightly fermented blood might—”

“Be quiet! You may be my superior officer, but I’m in charge of this operation—and I intend to get all the credit from Diana and Lydia when the time comes. If you behave yourself, I may allow you a little reflected glory, though—a nice garrison command. New York, perhaps, or Boston.”

“Will the papinium labyrinth stretch that far?” said Medea, half mocking, half admiring of her colleague’s diligence.

“Not at present. But with this fortress as our foothold in the free states, we can start burrowing in all directions. In the basement of this very mall I have had constructed a papinium factory, with over a hundred of the transmuting devices, so that papinium can be constructed by the simple fusion of heavy metal ions within a plasma field.”

“Such scientific wonders!” Medea said.

“It’s about time,” Dingwall said. “After all, we *are* eight hundred years ahead of them. We shouldn’t always fight down at their technological level—although I

would agree with our leader that the chase is so much more fun when we restrict ourselves to only a few slight advantages—the lasers, the skyfighters, what have you.”

“And what of Matt Jones and his ilk?”

“What can they do to us now? Besides, I have his child at my house, trapped in a forcefield and ready for conversion. I’ll send him to Diana on a silver platter. On second thoughts, maybe I’ll send him back, ostensibly unharmed but with his brain entirely reprogrammed, and have him undermine those meddling Joneses until they are hoist by their own petard.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ah, of course, I forgot; you haven’t made a study of their art and culture as I have.”

“And the mysterious ninja who sliced off my tongue?”

“One thing at a time, my dear! You were always so impatient. You must learn to temper ambition with caution.”

“Look at them down there! Like so many sacrificial animals,” Medea crowed.
“For when is the attack set?”

“Well, I have a little surprise planned ... a little something that Loukas Stourmwitch didn’t write into the score of his *Galactic Symphony*.”

“Won’t that twit back planetside be astounded when you discover the uses to which his music has been put!” Medea said.

“You certainly don’t know anything about our own culture, let alone the culture of these apes, do you?” said Dingwall in annoyance. “The composer was killed in a duel last year . . . someone challenged him for being a secret adept of the *preta-na-ma* heresy. Thus, I have no qualms about using his music for warlike aims, even though it supposedly was composed in the spirit of interplanetary brotherhood. Anyhow, about ten minutes into the first movement, there’s a cacophonous noise produced by everyone playing at random for about five minutes and the wind instruments blowing as loud as possible. In the fearsome racket, no one will even notice the roar of the papinium tanks as they burst from

their secret garages. And I have a skyfighter port in the roof, in case of emergency. It has one vehicle. Of course, our forces are expendable, but *we*, being important officers, are not. So I thought that a VIP escape route would be a good idea.”

“You think of everything, don’t you?” Medea said, with a twinge of envy in her voice.

“If only *you* had thought of everything in that silly Florida Project debacle,” Dingwall said, “you wouldn’t be stuck in a command post in the middle of a desert. You could have written your own ticket. What a stupendous idea that was—a mutant army that would do all our dirty work, leaving us to the fine art of governing and—”

“And eating,” Medea sighed.

CB sat down inconspicuously in one of the back rows. He didn’t want Dingwall or one of the converted kids to see him and give the game away. Tomoko sat three or four rows down. She didn’t turn around to look at him. It worried him, but he knew why she had to look away. Nothing suspicious! Nothing to reveal that the audience was liberally dotted with resistance fighters!

At the very front, in the VIP section of the audience, the ambassadors were even now seating themselves. The town mayor was there, nervously looking over a speech he had written; CB knew it would be one of those boring talks, a school principal rah-rah type thing. He settled down for a long wait.

Andrescu was chatting with the former president. Poor man! Reduced from governing the greatest nation on Earth to appearing at the opening of a new shopping mall. What a bummer.

CB waited.

Matt and the blue ninja sneaked off unnoticed to see what they could find. The mall was cruciform, with the concert area at the junction of four hallways. Three were full of the usual boutiques and department stores, most of which were not yet open; a concession stand or two were the only things doing a brisk business.

A passing kid commented on the ninja’s clothes.

“It’s the latest New Wave fashion,” the ninja said calmly, and the kid laughed. Matt heard him chattering excitedly to some friend, explaining how metallic ninja suits were in now; he’d just seen someone wearing one.

The fourth corridor was cordoned off: a sign read “still under construction.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Matt said.

The ninja cut the cordon with a deft flick of his katana, and they crossed over into the secret zone.

Chapter 25

Dingwall raised his baton. The first few pieces the orchestra played were harmless enough: a little Haydn divertimento, followed by a cute medley of popular songs of the '80s. The music was charming, Tomoko thought. She would have to beware of being seduced by its inane bounciness into forgetting the business at hand.

Doubtless the music had been planned that way to lull the audience. The mood was festive; after the mayor's upbeat speech, everyone had been delighted. This wasn't an evening of platitudes and stiff upper lips. When Tomoko looked around her she saw that the faces were happy. No one wanted to think of lizards this evening. No one wanted ever to think of lizards again. All right, so they'd give up the southern sector of the country, they'd scratch out a living with the meager, blighted resources of the war-ravaged north . . . just so long as they didn't have to think about the lizards anymore. A fatalistic apathy had set in.

Was it worth fighting it? she asked herself.

Time now for the new piece: the *Galactic Symphony*.

She leafed through her program notes and gleaned a few facts about the alien who had composed this music. The notes seemed more pretentious even than one of the academic papers she'd had to plow her way through when she was taking her anthropology degree. They talked learnedly of "retrograde inversions" and "sonic palindromes," of "chrono-reversal" and "semi-aleatory pseudo-textural polyphony." When the music began, however, she realized that all the verbiage of the program notes served little purpose save to disguise the fact that this alien music sounded more or less like the soundtrack to a B-grade sci-fi movie—with a few moments from a mad slasher flick thrown in. The children in the orchestra seemed to be playing their parts with relish, whether it meant tapping their violins with their bows or blowing through the wrong ends of their wind instruments. Tomoko noted, from the program notes, that the music had been adapted to suit the capacity of Earthly instruments and the technical capabilities of a youth orchestra. The final paragraph discussed the composer's dissident views at some length, explaining that he was an adept of the banned *preta-na-ma* philosophy and that his music was under interdict on the home

planet.

How ironic, she thought, that the lizards would be using this banned music as the cover-up for an invasion—something of which the peace-loving Stourmwitch would have never approved!

The music welled up. Some of the members of the audience were really getting into the bizarre sound effects, others were mystified. Some were even holding their hands over their ears.

Ten minutes of a particularly weird, repetitive passage now, in which everyone seemed to be playing entirely at random . . . she was wondering whether she too should hold her ears when she was aware of another sound.

A faint hum. A trembling in the ground.

Was she imagining it?

Matt and the ninja slipped into a shadowed doorway. There was a passageway—that led to a stairwell that climbed up to the top of the shopping mall.

“What do you think?” he said to the ninja.

“I’d say probably a concealed skyport. Perhaps there’s even a skyfighter there. Visiting dignitaries, maybe.” They started to ascend. They were now level with the mall’s upper story, and the stairs continued. They reached a catwalk that seemed to be a part of a network that spread out over the entire ceiling of the mall. Cables wound overhead. They walked out over it. The sound of alien music filled the air. From his vantage point, Matt could see that Dingwall was conducting in the pit below.

“There’s the skyport, I’m sure of it,” the ninja said, pointing to a part of the overhead walkway that branched off and ascended steeply into a doorway in the ceiling.

“Shall we explore?” Matt said.

“We’d better keep an eye on the concert below,” said the ninja. “I have the strangest feeling that the action is about to begin soon—”

Suddenly—

The familiar rumbling from deep under the shopping mall! At first the audience did not react, assuming it was just another sound effect of the alien symphony. Then the roar grew too loud. People got up from their seats, panicking. From their lofty hiding place Matt and the ninja could see them, scrambling over seats, running hither and thither like rodents—

“They can’t get out!” Matt said. “They must have the aisles blockaded . . .” He thought of CB and Tomoko. God, he didn’t want them to die.

He stared down there, desperately trying to discern them in the mob. It was impossible. It was chaos!

Then the papinium tanks burst through the unfinished floor of the shopping mall.

Rubble flew! Blocks of concrete were ripped asunder as the vehicles battered their way through the floor. People were screaming now, and the tanks were closing in on them, each one almost filling an entire corridor of the mall.

Then came a voice, booming through the building, distorted by feedback but recognizable as the voice of the very creature who had pretended to save Matt’s life only the night before.

“Do not panic! Mr. President—or should I say Mr. Ex-president?—distinguished diplomats and other prominent citizens of Washington who have deigned to come to this little soiree ... do not panic! You will not be killed ... not just yet, at least!”

Consternation . . . then, as Visitors swarmed into the halls and began to shove the humans into the diamond at the junction of the corridors, the panic died down a little and was replaced by a cringing, abject compliance.

A smiling Dingwall, surrounded by guards armed with laser blasters, continued to speak into a microphone, his voice taking on more and more the metallic rasp of the true saurian voice.

“For the moment you are all hostages in this impregnable papinium fortress. And what, you may ask, is papinium? It’s our latest technological breakthrough, my friends, and one that will enable us once more to exert control over those

rebellious sectors of this country that have so quaintly labelled themselves the 'free states.'”

Matt saw another high-level Visitor beside Dingwall now. He recognized her face. “Medea!” he said. “I thought—”

“Alas,” the blue ninja said, “we have great regenerative powers. Doubtless her tongue will have grown completely back'by now.”

Medea was strutting back and forth like an empress, haughtily surveying the humans, who huddled in terror of her crimson-eyed fury. Now and then she barked an order to one of the guards, who fired his blaster seemingly at random into the crowd. But they seemed too stunned even to react. Matt said, “We can’t just stay up here on the walkway! We’ve gotta go back down and kick some ass before all our friends buy it!”

The ninja said softly, “We must wait here. If I know Medea and Dingwall, once the carnage begins, they will not want to stay for it. Their miserable hides are more important to them than anything else . . . even than the cause they are supposedly working for.”

Matt held his breath.

“I told you so!” Dingwall turned around and beamed at Medea, who, though mildly miffed at her colleague’s success, did not dare appear too disdainful. Besides, there was a certain pleasure to be gotten from killing humans.

She was thinking: ***I'll allow him his moment in the sun. After all, the creature has been cut off from all respectable saurian relationships for months, working on this undercover job. Let him relish his few moments of power.*** She was already considering, of course, how she would unseat him and claim credit for the entire operation. Perhaps a duel to the death, she fantasized, over the control of this rich, new province. It was an ancient custom, sanctioned by centuries of reptilian law, but rarely invoked. But with Dingwall being such a self-righteous wimp, it would be easy to wipe him out. This entire operation might well be just the right stepping stone for her. Considerably cheered by this brief reverie, Medea continued her task of keeping order.

Her eye wandered through the crowd as the humans cringed and whimpered in terror. Old men, many of these VIPs, she thought. Not good to eat—stringy. But

the children of the youth orchestra, whom Dingwall had already gone to the trouble of converting, they didn't look bad at all. Except that they were a bit scrawny and undernourished. It was true that conversion often sapped these people's will to live so much that they would hardly eat at all—as a result, their flesh tasted bitter, tainted as it was with ketone bodies.

Food

There, in the crowd . . . that one looked good. A young boy with his hair standing on end, defiant looking ... ah, he must have spirit.

“What are you thinking, Medea?” Dingwall asked.

“About my favorite subject,” she said. She pointed to the boy she'd just noticed. “Dinner?” Dingwall followed the languorous crook of her arm and saw ... no. He had slipped into the crowd, lightning fast! “It's almost as though he knows us,” she said. She stalked into the throng, followed by two guards. The people parted in terror, revealing the boy standing there—

She recognized him suddenly. Dingwall did at the same time.

“Catch him!” she shrieked. And then, turning on Dingwall, “You told me he was in suspension—in a cellar of your house, you incompetent!”

The guards rushed the boy, who did a cartwheel and landed on the other side of Medea, and dodged back into the crowd. “I want him alive,” Medea panted, “I want to tear him limb from limb my-selfT

The boy emerged again on the far side of the conductor's dais. Someone in the crowd shouted out, “If a kid can fight these bastards, so can I!” and ran out, fists upraised, to attack Dingwall. A laser sliced him in two. The crowd was maddened now, out of control. They started to move in towards Medea and Dingwall—

“Tanks!” Dingwall screamed into the microphone so that the operatives could hear. “Mow these humans down now!”

Roaring from all sides as the papinium tanks began to edge the people in—they were going to be crushed, as though between the blades of a monstrous food processor! Medea thought gleefully.

Just then, an ancient man stumbled out of the crowd and heaved a small missile at the nearest tank, and—

The papinium layer—what was happening?

The tank's outer shell was melting before their very eyes . . . and within, the two lizards who had been manning it were suddenly exposed! Before they had a chance to escape, the crowd was moving in towards them and they were being dragged in by a dozen angry people, and their laser pistols had been yanked from them and—

“No!” Dingwall cried. “The one thing I never dreamed would happen—they’ve discovered some substance that breaks down the molecular structure of the papinium layer!”

Others were brandishing the little projectiles now. Medea gasped. Could they be what she thought they were, little glass dishes full of a gelatinous blue substance? What could such a harmless-looking thing possibly do to a tank made out of the newly discovered heavy metal?

“If they get to the walls,” she gasped, “then the outside atmosphere will get in and the air within, which we’ve carefully cleansed of any remnant of the red dust—will become contaminated!” She felt in her uniform, nervously making sure she still had the two ampoules of antitoxin that she had brought with her in case what she had already taken wore out.

No sooner had she spoken when she heard a monstrous collective shout from the throats of all the humans . . . there was a rift in the metallic blue wall of the nearest corridor, and some of the aliens were beginning to claw at their faces and fall, flesh frothing, to the floor!

“No!” she shouted. “We must escape, Dingwall!” she grabbed the other alien’s hand, pulled a laser blaster out of the hands of a guard who was gasping, dying at her very feet, and began firing wildly to clear a pathway to the secret entrance to the skyport.

At first Dingwall didn’t move, but stared at the spectacle about him. “My vision in ruins!” he was saying. “My grand, magnificent vision of a new invasion of the north—”

“Stop making speeches, and come on!” Medea screeched at him, tugging at his arm so hard that a wad of pseudoskin came off in her hand. She tossed

it angrily at the crowd and pulled him away.

They ran toward the unfinished section of the mall.

“The cordon—it’s been cut!” Dingwall groaned.

“No time to think of that now ... we must escape!”

The old man who had thrown the first of the bombs was shambling after them. There was no time to shoot. They could outrun him easily. Medea shoved Dingwall roughly into the concealed passageway and propelled him up the steps as the sounds of chaos crescendoed in the background.

Anxiously CB looked for Tomoko. They shouldn’t have gotten separated, but when that lizard spotted him he’d reacted as quickly as he could. He could not see her anywhere . . . what if they’d gunned her down? Tanks were exploding all around them as the papinium-fixing bacteria multiplied, sweeping through the blue metal and making it seethe as it dissolved, ripping great cavities in the walls and floors . . . suddenly he collided with Tomoko.

He put his arms around her. “Thank God, I thought you were totally history,” he said. “Where’s Matt? He’s with you, right?”

“I don’t know where he is!” she cried hysterically.

A lizard tumbled between them as they stood there, flailing around hideously as he died. “Grab his blaster!” he said.

She did so.

“A few of them must have antidote,” he said. A dozen or so of the aliens seemed completely unaffected by the exposure to the outside atmosphere and were marching around, methodically firing at whoever looked like he might fight back. “Watch out!” he screamed. One of them was aiming directly at where they stood and—

Tomoko fired. Blue light spurted. The alien toppled and died. The crowd

stormed over his body. They were tearing him apart, rending the air with shrill cries of vengeance. “Medea and Dingwall . . . where are *they?*” CB said.

A laser blast speared the air. They ducked. CB fell flat on his back and saw the ceiling and— “Oh, Jesus . . . they’re up there . . . and Medea and Dingwall are almost on them now!” he screamed.

They got up. Tomoko fired covering shots. “How do you get up there?” she said.

“How should I know? Look—there’s Ambassador Andrescu—going into the part of the mall that was supposed to be still under construction? He looks real intent, you know? I bet he knows something. Let’s go!”

They ran from the chaos. CB had a terrible feeling about it all. Even though they were creaming the aliens with Setsuko’s new discovery, how could they reach Matt in time? He glanced overhead. The network of catwalks hung like a spiderweb over the entire mall. “We’ll never make it,” he thought. “We’ll never catch up with them.” Tears sprang to his eyes. He tried to blink them away as he ran, but they spurted down now, almost blinding him.

“Don’t give up,” Tomoko was saying, “think of your love for them . .

They sprinted now. Andrescu was disappearing into a doorway in an unfinished facade. They followed him. They ran as if possessed, heedless of the crowd’s screams of anger and bewilderment and the shrieks of dying men and aliens.

Chapter 26

Sir John Augustine managed to make it to the dais the two commanding lizards had just vacated. He crawled around, chasing the dropped microphone. Thank God it was still live! Sighing, and affecting his most diplomatic demeanor, he began to address the rampaging throng.

“Now look here,” he said, “let’s be civilized, shall we? It looks as though we’ve actually succeeded in stemming an invasion. There’s no need for any more vindictive slaughter, eh? Let’s get ourselves together in an orderly fashion now .

.

He looked around him. His words were having surprisingly little effect. Nevertheless, a few here and there stopped to listen, and soon the word was spreading through the ranks. People were cheering, embracing each other. Someone was breaking down the window of a liquor store. Sir John started to say something, but the man shouted, “It’s all right, I’m the owner! It’s all on me tonight!” Whooping, the crowd surged past him. Sir John sighed, thinking of the old days when Virginia still

had stringent liquor control laws; of course, with the partitioning of America, such niceties had gone by the wayside.

I’ve done enough now! he thought with satisfaction. He turned to look for his old friend Andrescu, but saw him nowhere. What was going on? What was the old fellow up to?

Probably getting drunk somewhere, he thought. And he left the microphone to join in what was turning into quite a celebration.

“Wait for us!” Tomoko shouted as the old man moved doggedly up the steep steps of the stairwell.

Andrescu saw them, but did not stop. They ran up to him. He moved with surprising speed for a man so old. He was holding a sharpened stake in one hand and a mallet in the other.

“You’ll get killed,” Tomoko said.

“What is wrong with that?” the ambassador grunted. “My whole family was killed once

They got to the top of the stair and started to move gingerly out over the catwalk.

Ahead, Tomoko could see that Medea and Dingwall had already reached Matt and the blue ninja, that the ninja had drawn his sword, flashing in the gloom. “No!” Tomoko screamed. Medea, blaster drawn, was caught off guard. She whirled round and fired, missing Tomoko by a hair’s breadth.

“Keep low,” CB whispered. “Matt can take care of himself for a few moments. Then we’ll give them a surprise.”

Tomoko trembled. She was dizzy. She looked down; the crowd swirled as the doll-sized people rushed in all directions and the smoke from seething papinium tanks tendriled about them . . . ***I’m falling!*** she thought, her mind reeling from vertigo. She clutched the railing. The metal webbing of the catwalk floor clanged as she stumbled forward. “It’s okay,” CB said. “Just inch your way slowly, until you get used to it.”

Ambassador Andrescu moved implacably towards the two lizards, who were squaring off with the blue ninja and Matt.

Suddenly the blue ninja slumped forward, uttering a sharp cry. “Hold on!” Matt said. “Are you hit?”

“It’s nothing ... the red dust ... go on without me”

Medea and Dingwall were advancing now, a constant stream of blue light bursting from their blasters. The ninja’s suit—it was shimmering. The metal bound into its fabric was dissolving as the rapidly multiplying bacteria reached the upper levels of the shopping mall!

“No . . . antidote . . .” said the blue ninja. “Take . . . my sword” He fell against the railings.

“Crawl to higher ground!” Matt whispered harshly. He pointed to the opening in the ceiling which led presumably to the secret skyport.

Then he seized the sword from his old friend’s outstretched hand and whipped

around just in time to deflect a killing ray and send it slicing through the dark air. Ahead, he could see CB, Tomoko, and Andrescu approaching. The blue ninja, weakening, had worked his way over to the short flight of steps that led up into the skyport, but had collapsed against the metal bars.

Medea laughed. “I have you now, Matt Jones!” she squealed. “You’ve been such a nuisance to us. But not for long.” She fired at him.

He leaped up. The blast tore a piece of skin from his leg. He tried not to feel the pain. CB reached them at that moment and tackled Medea, sending her sprawling. Matt landed on top of her. Her face was ripped by the impact and he could see the green scales beneath, glistening with foul rheum. She roared and staggered up. He spun around in time to kick Dingwall, who elbowed him out of the way and made for the skyport entrance.

Medea pushed him against the railings, laughing demoniacally. He pushed back. Tomoko stood by with her blaster upraised. She couldn’t shoot. He could see she was scared of killing him by mistake.

“Just shoot!” he grated. “Better to kill us both than not to get her!”

She just stood there. CB grabbed the blaster out of her hands, ran forward and bashed Medea on the head. Snarling in surprise, she released Matt. They were all clustered around the skyport entrance now, and the blue ninja was gasping, choking, clutching at his throat—

CB had Dingwall at laser-point, backing him against the railings!

“Let me at him!” the ambassador said, brandishing the stake. He leaped on Dingwall and with one stroke of the mallet pounded it into the lizard’s heart. Dingwall screamed and flailed, his arm smashing into Andrescu’s face and sending him sprawling onto the railings. Dark, foul-smelling lizard blood spurted.

Medea twisted away and ran up the steps, and he followed, and she was just reaching the airlock of the skyfighter—

“Let her go, Matt!” CB shouted from the entrance. “Dingwall’s dead, the invasion’s over, let’s go home—”

Something flew out of Medea's uniform and rolled onto the floor of the skyport.

An ampoule of antidote!

And the blue ninja was dying, the alien who had saved Matt's life so many times. He had to get the antitoxin. He had to save him. As CB screamed for him to stop, Matt lurched forward and threw his body over the ampoule. A blinding laser blast . . . there was so much pain he couldn't even comprehend it, so much pain, so much pain ... a roar and a crash as the skyfighter took off.

CB ran to Matt. "Don't die, don't die, Matt.. . you're my best friend ... I love you, Matt."

Matt could hardly feel anything anymore. With a supreme effort he rolled over and held up the antitoxin in his hand.

"Give it to him," he whispered.

He couldn't breathe very well, the blast must have torn into his ribs, there must be a piece of rib sticking in his lung. Tomoko was there now, kneeling beside him.

He said, "Do you remember? How the alien swordmaster died for us? But he never died. That day we practiced the ritual of Zon together, I saw

him in your heart. Be happy, Tomoko ... my gift to you ... a new love."

Tomoko couldn't speak. She took the ampoule from him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Don't cry . . . it's a victory . . . - isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes." She was sobbing bitterly.

CB said, "You can't leave me . . . you can't leave me, Dad."

"Take care ... of your . . . mother, kid"

CB said, "I already lost one Mom and Dad. Before. Things were only just starting to be cool again. But now I'll never be okay again, never, never."

Tomoko kissed Matt very gently on the lips. Tears moistened the edge of his mouth. She whispered his name very gently. He said, "I know you love him. I saw it in your mind. It's good, it's how it should be. I'm happy."

She looked at CB; she saw in his face a strange blend of grief and anger. She thought, ***How can the boy ever understand? He thinks he's been betrayed for the second time now. . . every time he finds someone to love, that person is killed at the hands of the lizards.***

She reached out to touch the boy. He flinched, and in his face she saw that he was trying to suppress a terrible fury.

But Matt said, "Don't be angry, kid."

And died.

Andrescu had come up to the skyport now. Gently he pried the ampoule away. "Or else he'll die," he whispered. And he took it down to the alien whom Tomoko had loved, the alien who had

once been Fieh Chan, the pitiless commander of the Far Eastern Sector of the alien empire; who had become Kenzo Sugihara, the gentle swordmaster, tireless in his battle for justice . . . who now had no name at all, and who lay dying.

She had been unable to choose between the two before. Of course she had loved Matt, but the alien had awakened in her new and more turbulent emotions. Now, once more, the choice had been made for her. And this time there was no turning back.

She hugged the corpse hard to her. It was still warm, but soon the chill of death would seep into the flesh.

CB said, his voice cold and unreachable, "He died for something good."

They went down the stairs.

She looked out over the railing onto the scene beneath: the tanks melted into blue puddles, the people jubilant. Andrescu was waving and pointing. And then the diamond on which the orchestra had been playing tore asunder and yielded up more people. They wore chains. They clambered out of the labyrinth,

hundreds upon hundreds, gaping at unaccustomed brightness. Emaciated people with whip-scars on their backs. Children who had been enslaved or kept in the pens for food. There was more rejoicing. Here and there someone was recognized and made much of.

“The bacteria must be eating their way all the way to the end of the tunnels,” she said.

They were joined by Setsuko and Dr. Schwabauer.

“It is the most wonderful thing!” Schwabauer was saying. “New life—a fresh start for the captives—the opening of the new mall was, after all, an event of vital importance.”

Setsuko said, “The bacteria are multiplying exponentially! In a matter of minutes, they will have fixed all the papinium in the tunnels, and then, for lack of sustenance, they will die out. The world will have been purged of a terrible curse.”

“Matt must be delighted,” Schwabauer said.

There was a dead silence.

The professor looked from one to the other. When he saw CB’s face, he understood what had happened.

Tomoko said, “The main reason Matt wanted to get out of the lizard-controlled world was the kid. I mean, he wanted him to have a normal life, not to have to live in fear anymore, to go to school regular times like normal kids. But for me ... I want to get out there and fight them. I want to learn ninjitsu. I’m not going to stand around in the background anymore.”

That was her great plan, to go off somewhere with Fieh Chan-Sugihara: to fulfill some wondrous fantasy of fighting evil. But she knew Matt wouldn’t have wanted the kid to do that.

It was Andrescu who proposed a solution. “Perhaps he could stay with me? I am a cranky old man, but to have a child would perhaps make me feel young again.”

CB said nothing.

“In time you will heal, boy,” said the ambassador.

They stood for a long time on the catwalk, not quite participating in the triumph, because Matt’s death weighed heavily on them all.

But at last CB spoke. “The kids that are climbing out of the labyrinth now . . . they’re the ones that Dingwall had in his dungeon. Look, they made it out.”

Tomoko looked down. There they were: children, limbless some of them, struggling as they helped each other climb out of the pit. Even from this distance Tomoko could see that joy was in their faces. Though some could barely walk, they were singing.

“They’re free!” CB shouted. “They’re free . . . like I promised them! I promised them they’d be set free and they have been . . . and **we** did it!”

You will heal, Tomoko thought. And she opened her arms wide to embrace the boy. ***We will all be healed***.

She wasn’t afraid of the future anymore.

Chapter 27

The skyfighter threaded the dark night, its floodbeams sweeping over the Virginia landscape, lush, verdant, uninhabited, over the Blue Ridge Mountains, south toward no-man's land and the empire of the Earth's saurian conquerors.

Medea sat grimly at the controls. Now and then she could see a snake of seething Earth below, as though gigantic moles were burrowing through the Earth. Insufferable! The papinium tunnels must be dissolving everywhere; the entire network that had been so painstakingly built by the labor of thousands of human slaves, gone by a single stroke of biological warfare!

The thought of moles awakened her hunger once more. But she couldn't stop to feed now. No. Not until she cleared the red-dust infested area completely. For her antitoxin was running low, and the precious spare ampoule had been lost in the scuffle at the shopping mall.

Diana appeared on the monitor screen. She was not pleased.

"Diana, I—"

"No more excuses, Medea! You didn't even bother to report your failure to me. I was alerted by the failure of the papinium labyrinth's computer system, which registered on our Mother Ship's main computer. You little weasel! You rat!" Diana screamed, calling her by the names of some of her favorite foods. She winced at the thought of Diana's fanged, venom-dripping teeth sinking into her neck. Cannibalism was not beyond that woman! Diana went on for a while, excoriating her.

Medea was sickened by her failure. There'd be a courtmartial for sure. Maybe they'd send her back planetside. Maybe they'd even execute her!

Dingwall had been lucky. He had died swiftly enough at the hand of that deranged human. Staked through the heart, indeed! How primitive! Medea hated these Earthlings, with their outlandish customs and their absurd, suicidal resistance to the Visitors' will. And the fact that they could, on occasion, actually defeat the conquerors from Sirius . . . shameful!

She watched Diana rail for a while.

At length she said, "I'm tired of all this!"

She shut off the monitor.

It was a gesture of futile defiance. When she returned she would doubtless be called in for a trial. . . and she had ruined her chances of rising to the rank of supreme commander.

A little more defiance wouldn't make any difference to her fate.

Sighing, Medea watched the landscape speeding beneath; her thoughts turned to revenge against the resistance fighters who had thwarted her plans so grievously . . . and finally to feeding her bloated paunch.

EPILOGUE

THE RETURN OF THE

SWORDMASTER

In the mountains: many months later

Snowfall: the treetops blanketed, the ground soft and white. It was Christmas.

Two beings sat around a fire: an alien and a human, a male and a female. They wore the pelts of animals. They warmed their hands.

The alien said, "We must go on with the training, Tomoko."

Tomoko smiled, protested. "What? While the snow is falling? On Christmas Day?"

"Time is short."

Tomoko complained for a few more moments. It was a game that the two of them played often. They had often been lonely, camping in the open, living off the land; but they had both agreed that they must seem to have disappeared from the face of the Earth. At least, until she finished her training.

Today he didn't hand her the bamboo stave with which she had been practicing. Instead he gave her a sword.

"I've never seen this sword," she said, wonder-

ing, feeling the metal and seeing it sparkle against the snow.

"I have been working in the village on it," he said, "secretly. It is my gift to you. And now—"

He drew his own sword. They threw off their pelts and stood in the vestments of ninjas: not black but white, to better camouflage them in the snow.

"Come at me!" said the alien ninja.

She felt the power flow through her body . . . the sword was a part of herself, an extension of her innermost beings. She tensed a little, and the sword flew upward, whistling in the moist chill air.

She ran. He deflected her. Steel met steel; the clang echoed and rebounded across the mountainpeaks. She stretched her body taut. She coiled herself, she leaped, she sprang . . . she was a cat, a dragon . . . she was the wind.

They laughed.

And kissed, knee-deep in the snow.

"Soon will come spring," said the alien ninja, and though Tomoko trembled with the soul-searing cold, she knew that it was true.

And come spring they would go down into the lands of the lizards. They would live always in hiding, always ready to strike at the oppressors and to fade back again into the wilderness.

Matt would be proud of me, Tomoko thought. She thought of him often now, and with less and less grief. For he had not died in vain. She had become fiercer now, more strong-willed, readier to fight for the freedoms men had lost.

"Shall we work out again?" the alien ninja said.

“Yes.” She raised her sword. Once more she felt the flow of power.

A tiny voice across the roaring wind: “Hey, Tomoko!”

She turned abruptly.

He was standing by the fire, a compact, shadow-slim youth. At first she did not recognize him through the sheets of snow.

Then: “CB!” said the alien ninja.

And they ran to him. Tomoko said, “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

The boy said, “Well ... I kinda sneaked away.”

“But surely, life at the ambassador’s residence . . .” the alien ninja said.

“Bummer,” CB said. “Like, I like it and all, but it’s getting boring. I don’t think Matt really meant for me to sit on my ass all day doing algebra. I mean, like he knew he was **supposed** to want this stuff for me, but . . .”

He looked at her with earnest eyes. She saw that he had overcome his grief now. He had managed to find, at the core of those turbulent experiences, a fierce, profound concord.

“I’ve grown up a lot,” the boy said, reading her mind.

“But how did you get here?”

“I followed the trail of the papinium labyrinth. There aren’t as many lizard garrisons in the no man’s land as there were before. I avoided them easily. Then I found Ray Smith in the village, and he told me where you were. Man, it’s been, like, weeks getting to you. Weeks through the snow.

Well, I guess, Merry Christmas, you know.” He pulled a turkey sandwich out of his pocket and offered it to the two of them.

“Your voice is changing, Christopher,” Tomoko said.

“That’s not the only thing that’s changing!” CB said. “Ask the chicks at McLean

Junior High! They'll tell you I'm awesome."

"Yet you have come to us," the alien ninja said.

"Well . . . yeah. I talked it over with old Andrescu. He told me to go for it. I mean, like, it's my life, and I wanna do something really important in this war with it. For Matt's sake. Oh, he gave me a present to take to you, too." He fished it out of his pocket and handed it to them. It was a Russian Orthodox crucifix. "For keeping out ***nosferatu***," CB said solemnly, his still childish voice imitating the Bela Lugosi-like tones of Ambassador Andrescu.

Tomoko took the crucifix and showed it to the alien.

"Well," the alien said, "nothing can stop us now!"

"So what are the plans?" the boy said. "Like, I get to stay, don't I?"

"It'll be hard," Tomoko said.

"Hard! I can deal with hard, you know that."

"But we'll manage."

They stood on the side of the mountain in the snow, the three of them, overlooking the magnificent valley beneath.

"When the snow melts," said the alien ninja, "we'll cut across to Arizona. Maybe we'll work with the resistance. Maybe we'll be a resistance of three, swooping down to harass the Visitors whenever we can—"

"We're gonna kick ass!" CB said.

"But there is a little something I ought to tell you," Tomoko said. "You might ... I don't quite know how to say this . . . well, we might need a babysitter now and then, and—"

"You're shitting me!" CB exclaimed.

"Now, let's not get our hopes up," said the alien ninja. "The chance of our human-alien union producing a viable foetus is far from certain, and I don't

think that one missed period is any cause to think that——”

“I’ve always wanted a little brother!” CB said.

“Maybe he’ll be a lizard,” Tomoko said, thinking of the strange twins that had been born to Robin Maxwell.

“I don’t care if he’s a lizard!” CB shouted. The snow pelted their faces, but they didn’t mind; joy warmed them. Tomoko looked out over the terrain and thought; ***How beautiful Earth is . . . this world . . . our own Earth.*** And CB cried out into the roaring wind: “I’m gonna have a kid brother—and he’s going to be the greatest swordmaster in the whole world!”